

Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki

13

Suppose

a Kid from the
LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved
to a Starter Town



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UNSCRUPULOUS
ENTREPRENEURS...

Warden Urgd
Rules the prison
Hell's Lock
by fear.

...MUST REPENT!

Lloyd's furious Cooling-Off Punch stands
against the evils of capitalist prisons!



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Running Refugees: A Mass Breakout Staged Like an Evacuation Drill

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 13

TOSHIO SATOU

Translation by Andrew Cunningham Cover art by Nao Watanuki This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

TATOEBA LAST DUNGEON MAENO MURANO SHOUNEN GA JYOBAN NO MACHI DE KURASUYOUNA MONOGATARI VOL. 13

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Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna

Boy raised in the town of legend. A misunderstanding sent him to prison?!



Marie the Witch

Mystery shopkeeper. Actually the Princess of Azami.



Alka

Immortal chief of the town of legend. Dotes on Lloyd.



Selen Hemein

Lloyd saved her from a curse. Madly in love with the man of her destiny.



Riho Flavin

Former skilled mercenary. Joined Lloyd at the Azami Military Academy.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who insists Lloyd is her master. Also in love with him.



Rinko

The missing queen of Azami—which makes her Marie's mom.



Gaston Tien

Azami Adventurer Guild member. Admires Lloyd's strength.



Minoxi

Former Lidocaine Secretary, became the Treant Demon Lord.



Amidine Oxo

Head of the mafia that rules Rokujou from the underworld.



Zalko

The thief who kidnapped the king of Azami. His defeat proved traumatic.



Merthophan Dextro

Former Azami Army Colonel. Prone to stripping down to his loincloth.



Tiger Nexamic

Muscle-bound martial artist, hit it off with Merthophan.



Astax

Veteran Guard at Hell's Lock. An understanding person.



Urgd

Warden at Hell's Lock. Enforced inhuman treatment.



Eve Profen

King of Profen. Knows the truth behind this world.



???

???

Prologue

“Number.”

“Uh, oh, ten.”

Stone floors and walls, with bright sunshine streaming through barred windows, the air chilled and fraught with tension.

In the center of the room, a uniformed man leaned back in his chair—his cold gaze the primary cause of the oppressive mood.

Across from him stood a gentle-looking, rather nervous boy, Lloyd Belladonna.

In place of his usual linen shirt, Lloyd wore a striped jumpsuit—your standard prisoner garb. This was neither the latest fashion trend nor a sign that Lloyd had become a baseball fan.

Somehow, he'd been convicted.

The guard's arrogant glare settled on him. “Name?” he asked.

“Lloyd Belladonna!”

The man frowned at his cheerful response.

“The paperwork says Gaston Tien.”

“Um, yeah...”

Lloyd shifted uncomfortably.

The guard had seen that guilty look before. He sighed. “Fake name? Hey! Make sure this paperwork gets fixed later.”

“Yes, Warden Urgd.”

Urgd made a show of settling back into his chair, reviewing the documents.

“You’re booked for...burglary resulting in injury, destruction of property, violation of the Illegal Substances Control Act, and indecent exposure. You sure don’t look the type.”



“Um, what does ‘booked’ mean?” Lloyd asked, looking baffled.

Urgd pounded his desk, roaring, “A bit late to play dumb!”

“I’m not playing anything!”

Lloyd’s expression was so innocent that it was hard to believe he had a deceptive bone in his body.

“He’s either got brass balls or he’s a real psycho,” Urgd grumbled. “Well worth putting the squeeze on.”

His grin boasted a sadist’s relish.

“Squeeze? I’m not really here for a diet plan. I was hoping for mental training or self-improvement!”

The warden scoffed openly.

“Listen, buster, I dunno how much time you’ve done, but this place ain’t no walk in the park. If you’re expecting some cushy sanitorium with regulated hours and healthy meals, you’d best abandon that notion right here.”

A clear threat. But Lloyd’s response?

“Oh, yes! Exactly what I wanted! I’m looking to build my mental fortitude!”

Lloyd *did* look scared, but that wasn’t quite the reaction Urgd was looking for, and it only served to increase his irritation.

“Warden, it’s time.”

“Tch... Take him away!”

At his command, two guards grabbed Lloyd’s arms.

“Oh, thanks for helping! My limbs work just fine, though.”

He was dragged away, shouting “Looking forward to working with you!” with all the good cheer of a student who’d just joined a new club.

Unable to wrap his mind around the boy’s behavior, Urgd stood up and pulled out a cigar.

“Warden, you’re on the clock.”

“Put a lid on it. It’s just a smoke break.”

His subordinate was clearly irked by the man’s overweening attitude. Judging from the furrows in his brow, the veteran guard must have had it hard.

The warden’s smoke rose through the bars on the window, and the guard balefully glared at it.

“I’ve seen my share of inmates, but that one was unusually supercilious. Still, he looked frail enough; won’t be long before he shows his true colors.”

“Can’t wait,” the warden said, grinding his cigar into an ashtray. He glared after Lloyd. “Enjoy the Hell’s Lock experience, boy.”

This was the border prison, Hell’s Lock—the largest custodial facility on the continent.

Criminals from all over the world who had committed serious crimes—especially on an international scale—were brought here. As well as those who’d been caught on the border itself, or those whose cases were hard to tell which nation’s laws should apply.

It wasn’t a place where Lloyd belonged—so how had he ended up here? Had he really been arrested for indecent exposure? Had our oblivious boy finally extended his powers in an X-rated direction? That would likely just encourage the bulk of our female cast.

Let us turn time back before Lloyd’s first day in prison—and examine how this curious state of affairs came to be.

I’m sure the signals he sent have clued attentive readers in— As you’ve surmised, this all began with yet another misunderstanding.

A few days earlier...

At an Azami underground research facility.

Alka’s former boss, Rinko, had swiftly built this lab beneath the castle. It housed top secret documents and materials to aid in their fight against Profen—everything they couldn’t let leak.

There were also a lot of beakers and flasks filled with red and green liquids, but these were just decorative. Rinko said they helped create the *ambience* of

an underground lab. She was the kind of person who was very particular about pointless details like that.

Two people were sleeping in back—Eug, who'd been recently defeated by Alka, and the local lord Tramadol, who'd had alterations forced upon him.

Rinko was busy taking apart one of the mechanical weapons recovered from the battlefield, giving it a thorough examination.

"The closer I look, the more sickening it is. Clearly treating people like toys. I bet this was *her* idea."

By "her"—she likely meant Eve Profen.

Rinko shook her head at the thought, and began poring over the contraption's parts.

Bioparts pulsed. Grotesque forms squirmed like blood vessels running through churros—the sight would definitely cause the faint-hearted to vomit.

"Approximately three hundred of them. Where'd she procure the people she made them from?" Rinko muttered.

Alka swept in wearing white robes, her black pigtails fluttering. She might look nine, but inside—she was arguably just as immature. She'd once rocked the aura of an ice queen, but had long since been reduced to a kid grandma, doting on Lloyd.

She normally entered in a burst of (unwelcome) cheer but today she was controlling herself, her expression grim.

"Sup! How'd it go, Alka?"

Rinko was in full chummy boss mode, but Alka didn't even take issue with that. She sighed, plopped down on a chair, and mussed up her own hair.

"I finally dove all the way down to the unconscious. This Lord Tramadol's losing his ego by the day. It's really freaking me out."

"He's another one of these sick byproducts."

"Well, we've freed him from the spell, at least, so he *oughtta* recover...but doing a thorough inspection of some boring geezer's brain is brutal."

“Must be how most professional proofreaders feel when they’re given a light novel. Uh, pretend I didn’t say that.”

Good idea.

Rinko looked down at the biopart she was pinching.

“To string Eug along this far... Clearly, her gift for gab has not been lost in the jump between worlds.”

Rinko put the biopart back, then grabbed a beaker and a syphon and started making coffee.

“Good work anyway. Want some?”

“Now that’s a blast from the past. The lab chief’s beaker coffee. We all thought it was beyond unhygienic.”

“Legend has it, the artificial sweetener saccharin was discovered when the scientist ate a bread roll directly after work without washing his hands and noticed an unexpected sweetness. It was pure coincidence!”

“Lloyd’s really big on washing hands and dishes. Just give me a regular mug.”

“Too late!”

Ignoring Alka, Rinko poured the syphon-brewed coffee into a beaker. Her impish side had clearly not been lost in the jump between worlds, either.

“Here you go!”

“So hot! How’re you supposed to drink this without a handle?! Just use a mug like a regular person!”

Alka poured her coffee into a mug, then went back to her report.

“Anyway, I finally managed to analyze the thing Eve was trying to hide in Tramadol’s brain.”

“And?”

Rinko took a sip from her beaker.

Alka closed her eyes. “No surprise. Tramadol was supplying her with the corpses required for these gizmos.”

“Thought so. But I’m curious as to how he did that. If it was typical human trafficking, we’d have traced it in no time.”

“There were a good three hundred in that fight, plus who knows how many they had tested on.”

“They must have gone through a thousand corpses. Where’d they find them all?” Rinko asked.

“I found a hint, at least,” Alka said. “Tramadol was catching criminals and finding an excuse to send them to prison. Couldn’t quite figure out which one, though.”

“So that’s how? If something happens to a criminal, you can process it away. And a closed environment like a jail—well, it’s ideal for unethical experiments.”

But Alka wasn’t done yet with the information she got from Tramadol.

“At one point, they even tried to put him in charge of mass production, putting together a corpse-to-mechanical weapon pipeline.”

“Wait, that guy? How’s he gonna do that without Eug’s expertise?”

“Supposedly they set up a top-notch facility and wrote a detailed manual. Eve figured she’d have to cut Eug loose eventually, so she had her write that manual so anyone could pump out these weapons. That’s about all I got from him.”

“Eve... President Eva had his memories sealed up tight, so I figured there’d be something gnarly inside, but that’s ba-ba-bingo. Woot.”

Rinko flashed a peace sign like she didn’t have a care in the world. Alka rubbed her temples.

“But there are prisons all over the world, and it’s gonna take ages to check ’em all out. And if we trump up pretexts to inspect, and Eve works out what’s going on, it’ll blow up in our faces.”

But Rinko smirked, like she had a lead.

“Prisons? I know one that’ll do anything for a price.”

“Do you now? Not really my speed... Which country is it in?”

“It’s not in any country. It’s owned by the border patrol. They call it—Hell’s

Lock.”

Alka groaned.

“Aha! The stateless penitentiary housing criminals from every nation. Neither Azami nor Rokujou would have any means to keep tabs on what goes on inside.”

“International terrorists and villains... They also take perpetrators of crimes too close to the border to determine jurisdiction. Terrorists make for great components!”

Rinko was laughing, but Alka found that worrying, as she thought her former boss might take advantage of the system herself someday.

“Don’t you go copying this bright idea, toots. It’s unethical and out of line.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! In the game of life, one out will cost you. Game, set, match! I would *never!*”

She clearly would though, if the opportunity ever arose.

Alka’s frown deepened, but she put her thoughts aside. “Still, does Eve really *need* a ton of biomechanical weapons to get back to the world we came from?” Alka asked.

Rinko quaffed her beaker of coffee. “Her goal is to head back there *alone*. All she needs is to keep us busy stopping *someone’s* plans for world conquest, or preventing this world’s destruction.”

“All this for that?”

“Totally her style. Eve...President Eva will do anything to achieve her goals. If she’s immortal and has exclusive control over rune-powered mechanisms, she’ll have the real world in the palm of her hand.”

She finished her coffee, her words twinged with regret.

“And her plans got pretty far while I was off clearing my gaming backlog. Profen is likely a simulation run, to see how her immortality will affect the country she founded. And expanded.”

“All the more reason to stop her rampage. If she’s using corpses and demon

lords, she could keep it up however many times, and give me and the Kunlun villagers a real run for our money.”

“And the more people die, the stronger her armies will be. It’ll be a mob of the undead. Happens all the time in games and light novels. I heard the Rokujou queen got turned into a zombie, too? Eve’s been planning this for a while. But I found a place for myself in this world, and I’m not about to let her mess it up.”

There was a quiet fury in her eyes. Anger at being bested, the thrill of a worthy adversary, and the need to protect her child—all manner of emotions raging within her.

Alka kept her voice calm, trying to de-escalate the situation.

“Back to the prison... We’ve got a good idea on which one, but no proof.”

“Right, and charging in without evidence is a bad move. I doubt we’ll find the facility or manual that easily. It’ll take an inside job.”

“Inside...?”

“Someone to infiltrate and search the place for us. After being convicted of a crime they never committed.”

Rinko smiled like a child—Alka remembered all too well *this* smile always led to trouble. Her shoulders grew weary.

A few days later—

Katsu Kondo was on the top floor of Rinko’s Adventurer Guild. He’d filled in as guild master while she’d been away. Facing him was a burly man with a shield held in both hands.

“Can we trust you with this, Gaston?”

The man rattled his shield, grinning. “You betcha, Guild Master! I’ve been waiting for a chance to put myself on the line! I’m your shield man, Gaston Tien! Throw me into the fray anywhere you like!”

Katsu adjusted his glasses like a smart gangster.

“Thanks, Gaston,” he said. “We can’t exactly leave this one to Lloyd and the cadets. Even a fake record can have consequences down the line...and we can’t

put that on a kid.”

By record—he meant *criminal* record.

“I totally agree, Proxy Master Katsu! And! As one of the sturdiest adventurers around—the man who got surrounded by three hundred slimes and lived to tell the tale—it only makes sense that the compass swung my way and wound up singling me out.”

Katsu and Rinko exchanged glances, and proceeded.

He sure has the face of a criminal.

But best leave that unsaid.

Gaston’s smile was certainly sinister. It was befitting of his character design—if he were to be arrested tomorrow, the neighbors would all go, “Yup.” At best, he might have a calling in direct-to-video fare...and even then, he’d probably get gunned down in the opening sequence.

Alka was sitting with them, clearly unconvinced by the burly adventurer.

“Is he really our best bet?”

“He certainly has his flaws, but you can count on his positivity and his guts. He shows up when you call for him and takes any job, no matter how dangerous.”

The kind of shift leader who assumes the shop will fall apart without him.

Alka’s look went from uneasiness to pity.

“I knew a guy who was always forced to wear all the hats whenever problems cropped up.”

“Gaston may not have an indoor voice, but he’s been with the guild since it started up.”

Gaston rattled his shield again enthusiastically.

“I’m a founding member and proud of it! Experiments on criminals? What scum! I’ll find this sinister facility for you!”

“Mm-hmm. There you have it!”

Without a word about the clanging, Rinko smiled broadly and pushed some

paperwork over to him.

“Let’s figure out the charges you’ve been convicted of.”

Somewhat wary of her eager look, Gaston suggested, “As a shield user, my ideal fake crime would be assaulting someone to protect someone close to me.”

That was instantly rejected.

“Too normal! Azami wouldn’t send someone to the border for that.”

“Needs a bit more work.”

The stage managers were all shaking their heads, and Gaston looked surprised.

“Gotta go with assault and burglary at least.”

“Noice, Alka. Let’s start there.”

“Mwa-ha-ha, I always did shine in brainstorming sessions.”

Rinko’s praise went straight to Alka’s head.

Not about to be outdone, Katsu, who was always fishing for praise from Rinko, leaned in.

“Let’s add violation of the Illegal Substances Control Act.”

“Drugs?” Gaston frowned. He didn’t even drink or smoke. Most of his wages went to food for himself and his cats.

“Um, so he’s a dealer?” Alka asked, dubious.

Katsu adjusted his glasses and launched into a full spiel.

“You need assurances? Gaston, smile broadly.”

“L-like this?”

The sight of his smile got Rinko and Alka on their feet.

“Whoa! Pure evil!”

“Damn! Gaston, was it? How dare you keep that hidden up your sleeve!”

Feeling attacked without cause, Gaston could only mutter an apology.

“He seems like just a casual user, but that’s definitely the face of a dealer.

Which way do we go here?”

“Why not both?”

“Nice, Katsu! A user *and* a seller!”

Alka was getting a bit too excited, and started making demands, rattling them off like a photographer issuing instructions to a model.

“Okay, Gaston, try crouching a bit. Gimme a glare.”

“L-like this?”

Gaston did exactly as he was asked, and nailed it.

“Whoa, so sinister! Totally the face of a man who blames the government for everything without any real rationale!”

“Definitely thinks societal rules don’t apply to him.”

“He steals copper wire, sells it, and gets drunk on cheap booze!”

Gaston was toyed with for the rest of the day as they created a full list of charges along with the paperwork for his admission to prison.

“Man, that was a blast!” Rinko said, laughing merrily.

Little did she know, she was putting her own head in a noose.

“This is not what I expected,” Gaston muttered, shoveling a beef bowl into his mouth at a cafeteria near the border.

He’d agreed to this for Azami, and more importantly—the Adventurer Guild.

But the sheer glee with which they’d piled on his convictions made them far worse than anticipated. Burglary resulting in injury, destruction of property, violation of the Illegal Substances Control Act, and even indecent exposure.

It was all a cover for his investigation, but it still hurt. Especially since they’d kept insisting he looked the part.

“Selling drugs, stealing, assaulting people, smashing things...all without pants on!”

The very thought was painful. Especially the last bit.

And that was all getting him down.

“They were having so much fun I couldn’t quite put a stop to it, but...they’ve clearly gone too far!”

Thanks to the sheer number of crimes, his sentence was rather a long one. They’d promised to come spring him out when the time was right, but how long would that be? Rinko had a record of forgetting stuff for entire decades, so he might as well be serving his entire term. Basically—Gaston was getting cold feet. Ten years in prison was just long enough to make it all sink in.

The ordinary pleasures of life were already calling to him.

“Katsu said he’d look after the cats, so food’s the main thing... Gotta savor it.”

Gaston was quite a gourmet. And this might be his last good meal for a while.

“What if I can’t find this manual or the facilities? If they were to forget about me for ten years... I’m sure they won’t, but... Another bowl, please! With an extra raw egg!”

He still had time before the person who would help him get incarcerated arrived. He used it to devour more beef bowls.

As he cleaned up his seventh serving, Gaston...was unaware of the tragedy about to strike.

The base of the mountain was bathed in warm sunlight.

Gaston was leaning against a rock in the shade, waiting for the wagon to Hell’s Lock. A border guard with guild connections was supposed to help him infiltrate the place.

“Sure is peaceful.”

Hugging two of his precious shields, he watched the clouds go by. “That one looks like a cat!” he whispered. Then someone called out to him.

“Hey, you’re from the Adventurer Guild!”

“Ah! Big Bro Lloyd!”

The bright chestnut-haired boy had seen a familiar face, and come trotting over, smiling warmly, with a rucksack on his shoulder. Gaston had met Lloyd when he’d tried to test the boy’s strength and had nearly gotten himself killed;

since then, he'd treated Lloyd like a big brother.

"Good day, Big Bro Lloyd! On a trip today?"

"Nah, I'm here for work. I had to deliver some stuff to Rokujou, and am on my way back."

"You're keeping the fire burning!"

"The Azami king said I should do a little sightseeing, broaden my horizons. He gave me a whole week, but I've got classes, so I left early."

Gaston agreed, impressed. "You always were so dedicated!"

"Are you here for work, Gaston? A guild job on the border?"

Gaston had to think about that one. This was a secret mission Lloyd and the cadets were not supposed to know about. He needed to hide that...but he wasn't big on lying.

He racked his brains.

"Uh, basically. Training?"

"Training? Are you headed to the Ascorbic Domain, then?"

"No, nothing that serious. Um."

The follow-up question was even harder to answer. Eventually he managed: "It's a self-improvement, mental fortitude thing?"

"Mental fortitude? You're training the mind?"

Gaston felt like he was getting somewhere, and nodded.

"Yeah, that's what I'm lacking. Never had much of that, so I'm gonna spend a long time in some extreme circumstances honing myself."

Lloyd's eyes were gleaming.

"That's some intense training!"

"Yeah, it's just a bunch of lectures, I think. Not that tough."

Definitely the type who always makes themselves sound good when they lie.

Oblivious to that, Lloyd was impressed.

“Wow! I’ve been thinking the same thing. What I’m lacking is the right mentality—having self-confidence! If I could be more confident in myself, and stay positive, I could be a lot stronger.”



Gaston knew what to say there.

“You’re already strong, Big Bro Lloyd!”

“Ah-ha-ha, I know I should just accept that at face value. I’d love to join you on this training for the mind!”

Unable to admit this was the infamous border prison, Hell’s Lock, Gaston was forced to rack his mind once more.

“Yeah, uh...*hnggh*?”

But his bowels let out a cry before his brain did.

Apparently all those beef bowls and raw eggs had done a real number on him.

“Mm! Urk...eeee!”

The cold sweat on Gaston’s brow flummoxed Lloyd.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

But Gaston was so desperate to impress, he could not bring himself to admit that he had the runs. He just said, “Be right back!” and staggered off into the hills.

“G-Gaston...!”

“Got something to take care of. Don’t worry about me! Mind my shields,” he said, grinning.

Ladies and gentlemen, this man is gonna take a dump in the woods.

He managed a smile, and vanished into the distance, bow-legged.

Left holding two of Gaston’s trademark shields, Lloyd had no choice but to rest a while by the side of the road.

“How long’s this gonna take?”

Some time passed. Still no sign of Gaston’s return. It seemed his battle with Montezuma’s revenge would be a protracted one.

“I hope he’s okay...”

Lloyd debated whether to go check on him. Just then...

Cloppity clop.

An ominous-looking wagon pulled to a stop in front of him. Two stern men in military-esque uniforms emerged.

Men from the border guards. They looked at Lloyd, then at each other.

“This our guy? I heard he was...burlier...”

“But he’s got two big shields. Gotta be him!”

“Yep, and those shields are kinda burly. Must be what they meant.”

Seemingly satisfied, they approached Lloyd.

“Hey yo, we’re here to pick you up. For the thing.”

The guard lowered his voice on that last phrase.

“The thing?”

“Yeah, you know. At the behest of the Adventurer Guild.”

Lloyd struggled to put the pieces together.

The Adventurer Guild? Are they staff from this mental-fortitude lecture course Gaston mentioned?

Having believed Gaston’s lies wholeheartedly, Lloyd’s conjectures were off to a wrong start.

Adding fuel to the fire, he speculated about Gaston’s sudden disappearance.

I bet Gaston wanted me to take his place. That’s why he ran off into the mountains without giving a reason, and never came back.

And being the strong, silent type, he’d simply ceded the honor to Lloyd, leaving without a word. How nice of him! In reality, he was just lacking in toilet paper and squat-walking around the mountains looking for leaves to wipe with, though.

Oblivious to Gaston’s trials, Lloyd clapped hands in gratitude.

“Thank you, Gaston!”

With new determination, he turned to the border guards.

“Thanks for your help, too!”

This enthusiasm convinced them this boy was their client.

“All we can do is take you to internment. Nothing we can do past that point.”

“Understood! The rest is an internal struggle...but I swear I’ll show results!”

Well, the *internal* part was the same anyway.

Unaware of the misunderstanding, Lloyd boarded the wagon and was escorted off to Hell’s Lock.

Thus, we reach the start of our tale.

Utterly convinced the prison was a training camp for the mind, Lloyd happily accepted his prisoner number, put his arms through the striped uniform, and now here we are.

It was rather a stretch to assume “internment” was a portmanteau of “internal” and “mental,” but Gaston’s blithering had inadvertently paved the way. Anyone else would have started to realize something was wrong by now, but...

“This place really seems like it’ll hone your mind!”

Yup, if one squinted really hard, hostile guards just seemed like strict trainers, and prison uniforms were ideal for showing the effects of your diet plan, and the utter lack of warmth anywhere in this frigid building was part of the camp’s environment.

Through the wooden bars in the windows, he could see the medical ward, confinement cells, and watchtowers manned by guards decked out in intimidating gear.

Gazing up at those, Lloyd filed down the dimly-lit corridor, his handcuffs linked to those of several other prisoners. The others were all grim-visaged thugs. He glimpsed tattoos on their necks or wrists—it would take some courage to speak to them on the street.

Lloyd looked both far too young and far too weak. And that got the attention of an upbeat prisoner.

“Yo, kid, what’d you do?”

He was asking about crimes committed.

But Lloyd hadn’t committed any crimes, so he simply looked baffled.

“Nothing,” he said. “Unless you count the weakness of my heart.”

The prisoner let loose a belly laugh.

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, that goes for the bulk of us.”

“True dat. You must be some philosopher, kiddo. Guh-ha-ha.”

The other prisoners were laughing, too.

“Hey! Keep it down!” a guard yelled.

They quieted, but the guard was still fuming.

“Dunno how many times you’ve been in, but this place isn’t like the others. Don’t think we’ll be as soft,” the guard warned.

“How’s it different?” Lloyd asked, genuinely curious. But this read like he was playing dumb to wind the guard up, and the other prisoners sniggered.

“You’ll find that out tomorrow,” the guard spat.

“Okay!” Lloyd said, nodding earnestly. “I’ll do my best to grow as a person!”

Again, too positive—which read as a microaggression. It earned him more chuckles.

Unsure what to make of it, the guard glanced down his list. Warden Urgd had marked next to Lloyd’s name that he was a prisoner requiring extra attention.

“That attitude is why the warden’s got his eye on you,” he said. Spotting Lloyd’s cell number, he shook his head. “Poor kid,” he whispered. “That’s no reason to have him confined with that old-timer.”

“Which old-timer, Astax?” a fresh-faced guard asked.

Astax was clearly a veteran. “Arrived a few months back. Oddly jittery, seemed harmless enough but was the opposite.”

“Yeah?”

“Anyone we put in a cell with him wasted away. They started raving about tree monsters.”

“Trees?”

“That’s what they said. Looking like that, they think he’s a pushover. But try and lord it over him, and he sends ’em to the med ward. Sounds like he ain’t a problem if you behave, at least.”

“So just typical inmate-on-inmate violence.”

“Can’t do nothing without evidence. He’s one of this jail’s untouchables.”

The rookie guard made a face.

“This joint sure has a lot of those.”

“Yeah...and one above all the rest.”

“Warden Urgd?”

“Don’t,” Astax said, glaring. “He’s a special case. The most sadistic warden we’ve ever had. And the only one who knows who’s sponsoring Hell’s Lock... If we dare oppose him, we’ll wind up imprisoned ourselves.”

“We really got a mystery sponsor?”

“Apparently. There’s no other way you can fund the expense of running a giant-ass prison in the middle of nowhere.”

The guards kept their voices low. They reached the main cellblocks just after sundown.

The exposed cells sat like rows of show windows. If you squinted at them, they might come across as stylish studio apartments, but the kind of designer complex that was soon flooded with complaints from tenants.

The arrival of new company had the prisoners at their bars, gleefully inspecting and jeering.

“Hey, you’re back again? You don’t learn!”

“Shuddup! One little slipup...”

“Oh, I’ve seen him before! You finally got caught? Serves you right!”

“Who said that? I’ll remember that ugly mug!”

As the cries flew back and forth, Lloyd’s head kept swiveling.

“Yo, yo, they got a kid here! When’d this place turn into a day care, guard?”

What conclusion did Lloyd draw from all this?

“Not everyone here is voluntarily admitted!”

That happens sometimes. They think you’re too restless, so they make you join the tea ceremony club. That was Lloyd’s conception of it, but the reality was much harsher.

One after another, the new prisoners were placed in their cells. At last, it was Lloyd’s turn.

“You’re in here.”

When they saw his room, the whole cellblock buzzed.

“They’re putting a newbie in with *him*?”

“Poor thing.”

To a chorus of whispers, Lloyd hesitantly stepped inside. An iron-framed bed, the paint peeling off revealing the rust beneath. A sink stained with limescale. A discolored toilet...

“Wow...living here really would build mental fortitude! It’s like a prison!”

It literally *was* a prison.

Lloyd’s wide-eyed gaze turned to the man of small stature sitting uncomfortably on the edge of the bed.

A man as forlorn as he was forgotten. He had a prisoner cap on, but there was likely not much hair hidden beneath it. Getting on in years, he wore glasses—and Lloyd had seen him somewhere before.

“Oh? Aren’t you...”

Lloyd’s voice made the man jump.

“Mm? Ah! You’re...!”

“Threonine’s secretary!”

“Young Allan’s friend, Lloyd!”

Lloyd’s cellmate was Minox. He was the secretary to Allan’s father, the local lord Threonine.

Well, former secretary.

Once, Shouma and Sou had conned him into illegal Treant cultivation.

Threonine had often overlooked Minox and treated him poorly—and he was at his limit. He wound up possessed by the treant demon lord, Erlking. Lloyd had mistaken him for a drunken cosplayer, and handily defeated him. Poor soul.

Apparently, he’d been shipped off to Hell’s Lock afterwards.

Minox snatched off his cap, bowing low.

“I-it’s been a while.”

Lloyd bowed back.

“I-it certainly has.”

In Lloyd’s mind, he was no villain, but merely a man who’d dressed up like a treant to impress his employer and caused a bit of a scene.

He’d scolded him like any good bellboy, but was a bit worried he’d been too harsh. He rather regretted his role in the whole thing.

Minox moved on to the obvious question.

“Why is a boy like you in this remote internment facility?”

“I came here to improve myself! Someone gave me his place.”

That rather baffled Minox, but he just figured, *An average man like me could never hope to comprehend the minds of the truly gifted.* So basically, he didn’t bother to think about it anymore.

“Did Threonine suggest you come here?”

“Uh...essentially? I wronged him, Allan, and the hotel...”

Minox gazed off into the distance with regret.



But that gloom was soon replaced with a bright smile.

“But Threonine did apologize for his brusque treatment! With his backing, my stay here won’t last much longer.”

“Well, if all’s forgiven, that’s all that matters!”

Minoxid scratched his head sheepishly, like a grandfather who was just praised by his grandkid.

“They’ve come to visit me several times...and young Allan told me of your deeds. I heard—”

But before he could continue, a guard’s voice echoed down the block.

“No talking! It’s almost lights out!”

The new arrivals started yelling.

“Hey! We haven’t been fed! What’s the big idea?”

“Silence! Or we’ll be feeding you hot lead!”

Minoxid sat back down, sighing.

“Strict from day one. Did someone piss the warden off?”

Lloyd smiled, unaware that this someone had been him.

“No dinner... Is that part of the regime? I’m not even in the diet course. Did they just apply that rule to everyone?”

Unsure why he was talking about diets, Minoxid pulled a bread roll from his things.

“Go ahead and eat this,” he said.

“You’re sure?”

Minoxid smiled, holding it out.

“At my age, you can’t wolf down your food. I always end up bringing bits back from the cafeteria. It should still be good. In return...”

“Ask away!”

“Can you tell me how Allan’s doing at school? It was my task to polish his axes

—is he looking after them properly?”

“He’s polishing them daily! And recently—”

Shoving the bread roll in his cheeks, Lloyd whispered away, updating the secretary.

The cellblock lights went out. Tomorrow would be the true start of Lloyd’s oblivious prison sentence.

Chapter 1

Improbable Imprisonment: Like a Celebrity Who Never Realizes They're Being Pranked

The first day of Lloyd's unwitting prison life.

"Riiiiise!"

A guard's guttural yell broke the morning calm, and the prisoners rose and began to change.

Their old-timey striped uniforms wrinkled like a metaphor for their own hearts.

Ever a morning person, Lloyd was bustling around.

"Good morning, Lloyd. We must be quick, or they'll be furious...but I see I do not need to warn you."

Minox nodded in admiration. He pulled on his uniform.

"And a good morning to you, Minox. Rest assured, I'm always an early riser!"

Morning roll call over, the prisoners filed into the cafeteria.

"This is where we eat," Minox explained. "You grab a tray, line up, and eat wherever you please."

Lloyd looked around excitedly. "Wow, it's just like the one at school!"

"Enjoying yourself, Lloyd?"

"Oh, yes. I'm always the one making the food, so it's fun to have someone else make breakfast!"

"Ha-ha-ha, I see, I see."

Lloyd worked at a dining hall and cooked for his landlord, Marie—so this was a rare treat.

But given Minoxi's reputation, the other prisoners and guards were taken aback by their cheery banter.

"He seems fine?"

"He's sure got the old-timer's number. Is he here for confidence fraud?"

"The age difference doesn't seem to bother them. It's like they've met before."

They had, but Lloyd was pretty much like this with everyone, new to him or not.

Regardless, they quickly became so close that the other prisoners suspected Lloyd was a veteran grifter.

Picking up on the attention, Lloyd scanned the crowd. Some hastily averted their eyes, while others obviously worked through their food, so his eyes landed on a group occupying a nearby table.

Catching his gaze, Minoxi whispered, "Best not to stare, Lloyd."

"Oh, right!"

Lloyd took that advice to heart, and looked away. Minoxi began whispering more information about that group.

"That's the Block B gang."

"Bee?"

"Mm, we're Block A. Generally, that area houses the more vicious types."

"Oh, so they're here for the hardcore training?"

Still confident in his mental-fortitude camp theory, Lloyd just assumed they'd been forced to hand that group extra assignments. In a way, he wasn't that far off the mark.

"The one in the center is extra dangerous. He led a whole syndicate, trying to wrest control of Rokujou. He's famous in more ways than one, so if you stare too much, he might take issue with it."

"Famous...what do you mean?"

“Even before he was brought here.”

And while they were talking, one of the men brought in with Lloyd walked over to the group, grinning.

“Yo, Mr. Big Shot! I’ve seen your face in the magazines! You’re an actor?”

The man at the center of the group stared fixedly into space, point-blank ignoring the new arrival.

Black hair, slim build—even while seated, he cut a dashing figure.

“They say you tried to usurp the kingdom? I’m calling bullshit.”

Clearly, he didn’t believe the stories, and was here to pry.

“Gimme the down-low—”

But an instant later, the man’s lackeys had the smirking newbie surrounded. His smile soon faded, and he put his hands up.

“Wh-what, I’m just—”

“Just what?”

The voice was a low growl. The black-haired man rose to his feet.

“J-just...”

“Should I carve the truth into your flesh? My Rising Blue Dragons tried to take over Rokujou, and I’m *also* the star of *Rokujou Holiday*. Amidine Oxo!”

Amidine grabbed a fistful of the man’s shirt. The guards, who were all standing at the wall, pretended not to see.

“If you value your life, mind your own damn business. I’m on a life sentence. No matter what I *accidentally* do, they can’t tack more years on.”

That threat was enough to make the curious newbie scramble away.

Minox adjusted his glasses, warning Lloyd, “Amidine was an actor, once. We were all shocked to see him here, but word got around he’d committed treason. The men with him are no ordinary citizens, so it must be true.”

“*The* Amidine?”

“Indeed. Oh, if you just got here, you’ve likely read the papers. Or seen his

movies?”

Lloyd glanced back at Amidine, unsure how to answer.

“More like...I’ve met him.”

While Lloyd was encountering familiar faces...what was going on back in Azami?

On the top floor of the Adventurer Guild, Rinko and Katsu...had Gaston on his knees.

“.....so Lloyd took your place?”

“Yes. I accidentally bumped into Big Bro Lloyd, and he must have feared for my safety, and gone in my place.”

Gaston was openly sobbing.

Rinko rolled her eyes. “Definitely not.”

From what Gaston had told them, he’d overeaten and made a dash to do number two, and Lloyd’s epiphanies had kicked in—which led the boy to go off to a prison he thought was a training camp. Rinko rubbed her temples, groaning.

“Fiiine...it’s an undercover investigation. We can’t exactly run all the paperwork through again and say, ‘Our bad, it should have been this other dude!’”

Lloyd wasn’t even aware of the mission...even if he had been, there was no way *he* could pull off a stealth investigation without everything blowing up around him. But if they tried to send in a replacement, it would increase the odds of attracting suspicion.

“Welp, I’m screwed.”

“Don’t screw over Rinko, scrub!”

“Sorry! Sorry!”

Katsu began smacking Gaston repeatedly, and Rinko searched for an idea.

But just to finish her off—well, Lloyd’s absence created *other* problems.

“Rinko, darling!”

Rinko’s husband—the king, Luke Thistle Azami—popped in. Was he making a royal visit to the Adventurer Guild just to see his wife?

“Mm? Lou, I don’t often see you here.”

The king appeared mildly perturbed by the sight of Katsu slapping Gaston.

“Am I interrupting?”

“Sure, but...what is it?”

Kings don’t get out much, really. Katsu spotted the royal visitor and led him to the couch, and swiftly prepared some tea. Gaston remained on his knees, watching. He knew his place.

“Ah, appreciated.”

“Not at all. What brings you to our doorstep, Your Majesty?”

The king stroked his whiskers. “No biggie,” he began. “I just hadn’t seen Lloyd around.”

The eye of their current storm. Every shoulder in the room flinched.

“B-Big Bro Lloyd?”

“Wh-what could have happened?”

Perplexed by their consternation, the king continued, “You see, I had tasked him with delivering messages to other countries, trying to broaden his horizons. His physical strength is quite remarkable, so I imagined he’d have returned by now...”

“On sheer stats alone, the boy could be back in seconds flat,” Rinko acknowledged. “But if you told him to broaden his horizons, he’s likely diligently learning more about each place he goes to.”

“O-oh? He *is* the studious type, so perhaps he’s endeavoring to return with newfound knowledge.”

It certainly never occurred to him that Lloyd could have been so overly enthusiastic about the learning process that it had earned him a prison sentence.

The king bought it and looked relieved, which made it all the harder for them to admit the boy was in jail.

“May I ask, why are you broadening Big Bro Lloyd’s horizons?” Gaston said.

The king looked rather sheepish.

“Just between us, but I’m thinking Lloyd should be the next king of Azami.”

“““Har?”””

The three guild members were shocked. The king awkwardly scratched his head.

“I just personally think that would be nice. But even if it were to happen, it would be a long way off. He’s professed a desire to teach, and I feel that would serve as good experience and pave the way for him to join the royal family.”

“Er, uh...right.” This was clearly the first his wife had heard of it, and she was struggling to catch up.

“Perhaps I should have mentioned it,” he said. “It’s nothing formal, just an idea I had, so...apologies.”

Rinko waved his apology off.

“N-nah, I also think he’d do just fine.”

“To that end, I’ve had him running errands around the world, seeing what lies out there.”

“I-I see.”

At this point, the king looked concerned.

“But one thing worries me,” he said. “I’ve heard he’s rather lacking in common sense. If he’s not back yet...I do hope he didn’t get himself mixed up in anything unfortunate.”

Grim silence. Now they *really* couldn’t admit he’d been voluntarily incarcerated.

“If he’s going to be royalty, I want him to have a clean record. If he gets mixed up in some violence abroad and is charged with something, it’ll ruin everything.”

See above.

When no one responded, the king looked apologetic.

“I know, I know, I’m overthinking things. It’s just...he might end up being my son-in-law, so I’m already doting! Oh-ho-ho!”

“Ah...ah-ha-ha...” Rinko awkwardly laughed.

The king chortled, but this was no laughing matter. Rinko forced her lips to curve into a rictus smile anyway.

“Let me know when Lloyd gets back! There’s a lot I want him to learn.”

With that, the king smiled, waved, and exited.

Rinko (plus two) awkwardly saw him out, and the moment the door closed, she staggered.

“What now?! He’s got a record even as we speak!”

“Big Bro Lloyd... All for my sake...”

“It ain’t even for you! But we’re in a pickle, Rinko.”

Rinko and Katsu turned to each other, regretting everything. That laundry list of crimes—especially the part about indecent exposure—was clearly going too far.

“A king once arrested for dropping trou... There was a children’s book like that, but this story isn’t one you can read to your kids.”

“More like a tale that will live in infamy.”

Rinko was all in favor of Lloyd as a potential son-in-law, so this hit extra hard.

“Ugh, we’ve gotta find some good reason to get his record expunged!”

“Hard to chalk it up as a clerical error. The whole thing’s a fraud to begin with. If anyone gets suspicious and starts looking into it, it’ll come tumbling down like a house of cards.”

“I really am screwed!” Rinko wailed.

Katsu slapped Gaston again.

But no matter how far down you are, things can always get worse. Another

blow was about to land.

“Sup! Rinko here?”

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“.....mm.”

Riho, Selen, and Phyllo...three girls from Lloyd’s class—already regulars at the guild who could get waved right through the door like they were stopping by the shop on the way home from school.

“H-hey, girls,” Katsu said, abandoning his battery of Gaston.

“What’s going on, Proxy Master Katsu? You look worn out.”

“.....busy?”

“Uh, yes, it’s been a day.”

“Don’t overdo it,” Selen said—then asked, “Anything going on? We passed the king on the way in.”

Rinko smiled evasively. “Oh, Lou just popped by to see me. Like we’re newlyweds again!”

“That is how loving couples *should* be.”

Rinko pumped a fist, convinced she’d wormed her way out of it.

“You were gone an awfully long time, Rinko. You gotta cut him some slack here.”

“Ah-ha-ha, well, if you say so, Riho,” Rinko said, folding her hands behind her head.

“.....so? Were you done with that?” Phyllo asked, eyeing the well-slapped Gaston.

“Pay it no heed,” Katsu said, immediately in denial. “He merely slipped up a little.”

“I am repenting, young ones! Do not wind up like me!”

“.....we wouldn’t even if you asked us to.”

Phyllo didn’t mince words, and Gaston hung his head. He might be a tank, but

his mind was as delicate as boiled tofu.

“So why are you girls here? Free tea?” Rinko asked.

Selen looked her right in the eye. “Have you seen Sir Lloyd around?”

“*Hurp!*”

Rinko made a very odd noise, and all eyes locked on her.

“.....What a curious reaction.”

“I-I’ll take that as a compliment. But why do you ask? Lloyd’s running errands in other countries to...broaden his horizons.”

“Yes, but given Lloyd’s skills, if you give him a week, he’ll wrap it up in three days, possibly two.”

“We had him pegged as being back by now.”

“.....I’m with them.”

The exact same reasoning the king had brought to Rinko and her conspirators. They were all sweating.

“Uh, I’m not so sure...?”

“Big Bro Lloyd is a studious man!”

“If you tell him to broaden his horizons, he’ll stay and learn!”

Like a pre-planned presentation, they were each saying their lines in turn. That made the girls suspicious.

“What are you hiding?” Riho asked, eyeing them over.

“W-we’re not hiding anything!” Rinko made desperate excuses, which were her only real options. She could hardly admit her screwup had resulted in Lloyd going to prison.

“I’m sure Sir Lloyd is perfectly fine, but *if* he ran afoul of the law abroad...the border guards are inordinately wary. I’ve been questioned so many times it’s getting rather hard to come up with new aliases.”

Her experience (coupled with the admission that she regularly traveled under false names) certainly gave a glimpse into the terrifying ways of how Selen

operated as a stalker.

“If he were ever in prison, I would be forced to break in! For love!”

As Selen got herself worked up, Phyllo started cracking knuckles.

“.....I’d crush ‘em.”

Riho nodded in agreement.

“Well, I doubt *that* happened, but if he’s been framed, there’ll be hell to pay. And we’ll want the three of you backing us.”

She was half joking, but the guild members...

“““Riiight...”””

They knew too much to see the humor in it. Strained agreement was the best they could manage.

“So if Sir Lloyd does put in an appearance, let us know.”

“Absolutely,” Rinko intoned, and saw the girls out.

Once they were gone, three sweaty faces immediately huddled together.

“Augh! What do we do?!”

“Can we even do anything?!”

“This won’t be solved by offering up my head.”

“““Not at all.”””

This was not turning out to be a productive discussion. Gaston’s self-sacrifice was swiftly rejected.

“Even *my* head wouldn’t silence those girls!” Katsu said, shuddering.

“Selen’s already a legend—I need say no more.”

“Nope.”

A legendary stalker, yes.

“Phyllo’s soft-spoken and may seem pretty chill, but she’ll plunge into the jaws of death where Big Bro Lloyd is involved. Word is, she learned to fire shock waves from her bare hands just to impress him.”

“I-is that really true?”

“And Riho Flavin...for all she denies it, she’s head over heels for the boy. Since she keeps her feelings bottled up, once she goes off—she’s even more of a threat than Selen. Once primed...”

“Ka-boom.”

Rinko made a gesture like her loins were exploding, and Gaston quickly snapped his hands over his crotch.

“She explodes?!”

Gaston reeled back muttering, “Bad news! Bad news!”

“We’ll do something!” Rinko said, trying to calm him down. “We’ll figure this out! Lloyd’s mission runs for another four days...”

That was their time limit. Rinko assumed the gravest expression since she’d arrived on the scene. There had likely been better occasions for this look...but now’s not the time to point that out.

But the relief it provided proved fleeting because Alka popped in.

“Yo, Lab Chief Rinko, how’s it hanging?”

“““____?!””””

The arrival of the *last* person they could afford finding out made them all gulp in voiceless harmony.

“Wh-what? Why’d you all gasp at once? Hmm, aren’t you...”

Alka’s gaze turned to Gaston.

“Oh crap!”

“Why are you still loitering around here? I thought you’d be in prison by now!”

“Er, uh...,” he stammered.

Rinko jumped in. “Yeah, this idiot overate on his last outside meal, and got sick. Don’t want him disrupting the mission, so we delayed it. We’ll have him in before too long!”

“Right, Gaston?”

“Yes, can’t wait to be behind bars!”

Katsu was slapping the back of Gaston’s head again. That struck Alka as odd, but she quickly let it pass. She really didn’t care about anything unrelated to Lloyd.

“Well, if you get your job done, I won’t complain...but has anyone seen Lloyd? I figured he’d be back from his errand by now.”

“Good question.”

“He’s so studious!”

“He was told to broaden his horizons and is likely traveling the world to learn.”



They were very much in synch, and repeated what they'd said last time. Practice makes perfect. Puzzled, Alka looked rather bowled over.

"Uh, huh...well, I thought as much... Say, did you rehearse that routine?"

""""Not at all!""""

Their harmony left Alka speechless. It felt all kinds of wrong, but she failed to make the leap to "Lloyd went to prison instead of Gaston" so she just concluded the three were thick as thieves.

"So? That all you were after, Alka?"

"I also brought news." Alka winced. "A couple of men I knew got themselves in trouble near the Rokujou border and will likely be sent to the slammer. Honestly, it was such trivial stuff. I can't believe anyone would want to convict them."

"Wow, at a time like this... What a coincidence." Katsu adjusted his glasses in surprise.

"So I figured, with what we got going on, we might as well brief those two and have 'em help. Hate to say it to his face, but this might be a tall order for just Gaston alone, and it can't hurt to increase our numbers... Sorry to dump it on you after it's done."

Rinko folded her arms, nodding.

"If they got brought in that easy...they might be desperate for prisoners. Your friends didn't do anything that remarkable, right?"

"Yup, normally they get off with just questioning."

"They...get questioned a lot, then? That sounds ominous. Who are we talking about?"

Alka winced. "Uh...a farmer and a macho man? Charged with...indecent exposure."

That alone was enough to tell Rinko who these men were. She winced, too.

Back to Hell's Lock—in the warden's office.

A luxury leather sofa, a low table carved out of one giant tree... You'd think

these accoutrements would be reserved for a VIP lounge, but instead the table was covered in pieces of a model kit.

This room had the impression of a man cave, or a child's bedroom, not a workplace.

"What's this about?" Amidine said. He'd been summoned here. "You'd never let me shirk my work duties without reason."

Warden Urgd pulled two cigars from his case, chomped down on one, and handed Amidine the other.

"Take a puff."

The warden's arrogance earned him a frown, but Amidine lit the cigar and took a long drag.

"Hahh...another task?"

"Why else would I call you here? What, you think I was just craving company?"

Urgd belched a cloud of smoke at the other man.

Amidine couldn't even take pleasure in the cigar. He let out a smoky sigh, and got to the point.

"What's the order?"

"Go after the new arrivals," Urgd commanded.

Amidine leaned back against the wall. "Already? What'd they do?"

"Nothing much. One of them just rubbed me the wrong way. Smooth grifter type, thinks he can handle prison life with a glib smile. Seems like his attitude is rubbing off on the others, and they're all *at ease*."

Remembering the inmate who came at him at breakfast, Amidine conceded the point.

"Yeah, they're a bit cocksure. How many are there? Less than ten, right?"

"They'll be at the storage shed during cleaning hour. Bring your goons and do what you like. Anything short of killing, we'll turn a blind eye."

Amidine grinned.

“I’ll put the fear of god in ’em. Sounds like a good way to let off some steam.”

He took one last drag and ground out the cigar. Very stylish.

The boss of Rokujou’s Rising Blue Dragons.

Reminded of that fact, Urgd drove his point home.

“Listen, I don’t care what mob you ran with, but here you’re just another inmate. The reason you’re getting any special treatment is because you’re an asset to me. Don’t forget your future here depends on *my* goodwill.”

Amidine swore too softly for the warden to hear, then smiled.

“I hear you loud and clear.”

He turned to go, muttering to himself.

“Top-quality smokes, fine shoes... A bit extravagant. He’s got his fingers in something...right here in Hell’s Lock.”

Curious where the warden’s money came from, Amidine left the office.

“Best I don’t overstay my welcome,” he growled.

Afternoon was time for penal labor.

Except for the most dangerous criminals, all prisoners were required to work.

This labor came in all shapes and sizes, from detailed handicrafts to making basic necessities or industrial glasswork. And of course, they also had hard labor jobs including mining, farming, or street paving—it depended on your status within the prison, but these tasks accounted for the bulk of the work.

There were also a few prisoners tasked with running the prison itself: janitorial work, laundry, maintenance, and upkeep.

This afternoon’s work was your basic cleaning protocol. Lloyd was good at that, and was motivated to boot.

“Cleaning is critical to a healthy mind!”

To hear him tell it, this was like how Zen monks clean their temples.

The other inmates laughed at his positivity so unlike a prisoner.

“Talking like the class rep.”

“Trying to be a model prisoner?”

Minox smiled weakly.

“You’re always so cheerful, Lloyd. I wish I could be the same.”

Sighing, he began to sweep.

“Young Allan was much tidier than you’d imagine. His father was not especially fastidious, so he must have taken after his mother.”

“He’s always the first to take out the trash at the meal hall! And better about bussing tables than I am.”

Talking about Allan, the two of them set about their work...until...

“Yo, old-timer, lemme borrow the boy.”

The speaker had been interned at the same time as Lloyd.

“Mm? What’s up?”

The outgoing prisoner scratched his head.

“I’m not sure. The guards said all the newbies should gather... Maybe a lecture on how to clean? Or like, ‘Cross this line and you’ll get shot!’”

“Odd. They don’t usually bother with that...,” Minox said, smelling a rat. He folded his arms, thinking...but if the guards gave the order, he wasn’t in a position to do much.

“We can’t exactly refuse without good reasons, so I’m taking the kid. Lloyd, c’mon. Guards are calling.”

“Oh, okay! Such an odd term for a trainer! Are you sure it’s not ‘guide’?”

Convinced the uniformed guards were here to help with diets and instill mental fortitude, Lloyd happily did what they said.

“Lloyd,” Minox said. “Something feels off, here. Take care.”

“Uh...okay?”

Lloyd didn’t get it, but he appreciated the thought.

He went off with the outgoing prisoner—to the toolshed.

A moldy brick building with windows clearly not cleaned in years, and weeds growing in the corners.

The interior was dimly lit, and the building was somewhat isolated, perfect for misdeeds.

Along with Lloyd, the other new arrivals were assembled.

“Must be a lecture on cleaning for us newbies,” the outgoing prisoner said. “Don’t use water when you sweep, or where to pile dry leaves...that sort of thing.”

“Maybe they just want us cleaning this shed!”

Another prisoner spotted them chatting. “Yo, bro!” he said, holding up a hand.

Lloyd gave him a high five. “Uh, hey there. You also think it’s a lecture?”

“I was, but this feels like something else. You notice how the guards all disappeared?”

“Is that even allowed?”

A stir ran through the group. Then the door in the back opened, and when they saw who it was—everyone frowned.

“If it is a lecture, they pulled in the worst men for the job.”

Emerging from the darkness were Amidine and his underlings. There was a dozen or more of them. Except Amidine, they were all carrying pruning shears or mallets.

“Goes a bit beyond hazing...and the guards are in on it.”

Everyone looked nervous.

Amidine picked up on their anxiety and kept his voice low.

“Settle down.”

His voice carried far like an actor’s. And as a mafioso, it sounded threatening. The combination made the career criminals shake in their boots.

When he was sure he had their attention, he settled down on a wooden box.

“In our line of work, you can’t let disrespect stand. Everyone who comes here knows that for a fact.”

The prisoners exchanged glances.

Amidine tapped his temples, smirking.

“Simple matter of establishing who’s on top, and who ain’t. You fall in line; you won’t get hurt. It’s that simple.”

“Who’s on top?” The outgoing prisoner sneered. “You’re just the guards’ lapdog.”

“Punk!” a minion roared. “How dare you speak to Amidine like that?!”

But the other newbies started backing up their fellow.

“We heard you run errands to stay on the warden’s good side.”

“Mafia with treasonous ambitions, yet reduced to common thugs.”

“Too sad to even laugh at, heh-heh-heh.”

As laughter echoed, Amidine rose to his feet.

“A-Amidine, we gotta show these punks...gah!”

Amidine punched the minion who’d yelled first.

He went flying back, slamming into the shed wall.

Tools flew everywhere. Amidine took out a handkerchief, wiped his fist and glared down at the man.

“Imbecile. You think I want you popping off at their bullshit?”

Punching one of his own men was enough to silence everyone. Showing no mercy to your own crew was a classic mafia intimidation tactic.

And it proved highly effective here.

Feeling it working, Amidine’s grin grew evil.

“Consider your position here. I was just trying to show you the ropes, but you trampled on my goodwill and attacked without provocation! I testify to that,

and all your sentences are gonna get extended.”

“Hah? This is a setup?”

“All it takes is a word to the guards. We’re model prisoners! Guess who they’re gonna believe.”

Amidine’s minions hefted their weapons, advancing on the newbies.

“Y-yo, wait...!”

“If you’d just held your tongues, this would never have happened. Now you’ll be nursing injuries with a long sentence, and do a spell in solitary for good measure. You only have yourselves to blame!”

He raised a hand, but just as his lackeys were about to attack— “Oh, this is bad! He didn’t catch himself right. That’ll form a bruise if we don’t take him to the doctor’s office now.”

Lloyd had moved the heap of tools aside and was lending Amidine’s minion a shoulder.

Amidine’s face clouded over. Clearly one of the newbies was still challenging him.

“Are you too dumb to follow the plot? Goddamn kids are...huh?”

Rain started to fall from the clouds. Drops of sweat from his brow rolled down his cheeks, dampening his ankles.

That intimidating aura vanished. Snot ran free, and a weird hiss escaped his lips.

Lloyd turned toward him, smiling warmly.

“Long time no see, Amidine!”

“Aiiiiiiiieee! R-Roy? Lloyd Belladonna?!”

A painful blast from the past.

Disguised as an adult via magic, this boy had been the devil in the works that had ruined all the Rising Blue Dragon’s plans. The very sight of him made Amidine and his minions’ knees buckle.

“Wh-why are you here?! Th-this is...”

Lloyd just smiled, leaving the question unanswered.

“King Sardin told me what happened!” he said. “I couldn’t believe you did all those awful things. A real blow to your fans!”

They’d briefed Lloyd on everything about Phyllo’s family issues, and Amidine’s villainy—though he remained oblivious to his own part in resolving them.

The fact that Lloyd knew both Amidine and the king of Rokujou sent a stir through the new prisoners.

“I have a good idea why you’re here, Amidine. It’s a waste of your acting skills. And here, King Sardin is generously giving you a chance at redemption!”

Lloyd’s smile was really turning the screws.

“You mustn’t waste that generosity. Just because you want to be the top dog in a small community doesn’t justify intimidating newbies.”

“Uh...huh...”

As Lloyd stepped closer, Amidine reeled back.

“I’m hardly perfect myself, but this just isn’t right. If you keep this up—”

Lloyd’s look was so intense that every mobster, including Amidine himself, dropped to their hands and knees.

“S-sorry! Our mistake! Forgive us! Mercy, please!”

They said every apology and plea they could imagine, all at once—then turned tail and fled the shed.

“I was just going to tattle on him to the king! If you’re that scared of a scolding, don’t be mean in the first place!”



Lloyd was fuming.

Meanwhile, the prisoners were gaping at Lloyd. What had he done to make even Amidine fear him?

“Wh-who are you, Lloyd?”

“Kind of a long story,” he said, reluctant to try and explain it all.

This just convinced them that he was someone truly remarkable, and earned him admiring looks. They all thought of him as someone who had connections to heads of state. Which *were* all true assumptions!

Lloyd picked up a broom, smiling.

“Let’s get this place cleaned up! Time is money!”

“Y-yeah!”

“We’re with you, Lloyd!”

“Uh, okay?”

From that day on, Lloyd was the top dog of Block A, the man who’d sent Amidine packing.

Warden Urgd watched from a distance as the newbies left the shed uninjured and merrily began to clean.

“Grr, Amidine! You screwed the pooch. That grifter had your number, mm?”

He tossed aside his half-finished model and ordered the guards to bring Amidine to him.

A few minutes after labor time ended...

Amidine was back in the warden’s office. Only this time, he was visibly panicking.

Urgd scowled, and said nothing.

At long last, he broke his silence, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “The boss of the Rising Blue Dragons, the man who nearly overthrew Rokujou. Amidine Oxo. Can’t even put the screws on a couple of newbies. They really ripped your claws out.”

“.....”

There was nothing Amidine could say. He was forced to stand there and take it.

“At least come armed with an excuse!” the warden roared, pounding his desk. The half-finished model went flying.

Pieces of it rolled across the floor.

Amidine picked one up, toying with it. Rather than trying to find an excuse, he sought answers.

“Why is Lloyd here?”

“You wanna hear his record? Burglary, assault, drugs, indecent exposure.”

“All that...?”

A laundry list of crimes, plus the fact that a boy from Azami was in the border prison at all... Amidine frowned. Something wasn't right here.

“Makes no sense...”

Warden Urgd took his pensive look as a sign of weakness, and snorted.

“Hmph. The man's a born grifter. A con artist who goes around stirring the pot. I heard he said some shit about King Sardin and freaked you out? Can't believe you bought that line...”

All this went in one ear and out the other. Amidine knew perfectly well Lloyd really was connected to the king.

“Why would he... It didn't seem like he's after me, but...”

“Are you even listening, Amidine? What are you so worried about?”

The warden's roar didn't even make him flinch. The glint in Amidine's eyes made it hard to believe he was the one being yelled at.

“There's been quite a bit of prisoners going in and out lately, Warden. What's up with that?”

“What's it to you? Why would you care? Huh?”

Amidine plastered a phony smile across his face.

“Oh, I don’t. It’s just how my mind works! It’s not the first or second time a dozen men have rolled in at once. Is there a regular crime wave happening on the border?”

Urgd wasn’t quick to answer. His glare was baleful.

“Big words from a man who used to cause said crime waves.”

“You’ve got me there. Arrivals are one thing, but departures are another. Where are they transferring to?”

“Those with light sentences or whose jurisdiction has been settled get moved to regular prisons. That’s how a border prison functions. A nasty piece of work like you ain’t going anywhere, though.”

That was clearly a prepared answer, and Amidine knew it.

“Warden, it’s none of my business if you get your hands dirty, but watch your back. Especially where Lloyd Belladonna’s concerned.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just a lowly prisoner. I can say no more.”

Amidine bowed and exited the room so smoothly, Urgd forgot to yell at him for it.

“.....Oh, hey! Tch.”

Having yet to fully vent his frustrations, Urgd swore once, then sat down heavily.

“Amidine Oxo...if he’s no more use to me, I’d best dispose of him. But this Lloyd could be a bigger thorn in my side than I imagined...”

Angrily, he lit a cigar, belching smoke and swearing.

Meanwhile, Amidine was walking away, brow furrowed, muttering on and on.

“Best to assume Lloyd Belladonna’s been sent here on some sort of mission.”

He paused, glancing back at the warden’s office.

“Judging from Urgd’s reaction...this joint is likely using prisoners as fodder for something. Might well be me next, if Lloyd Belladonna doesn’t come after me

for today's mess."

Amidine's eyes turned to the window, to the block where the solitary cells stood.

Criminals were sent there for good reason.

"For better or worse, the warden's eyes are on Lloyd Belladonna. The other guards will likely focus on him, too. This might be my chance to make a break for it."

Spotting a guard approaching, he lowered his voice.

"I've prepared everything I can, but to make it happen...I'll need Zalko's help. And he's still held in *there*."

"Quit your mumbling! Hands out!"

".....Sorry."

Amidine swore to not die in this prison, and was cuffed and led back to his cellblock.

Hell's Lock was composed of four main buildings.

Block A. Where Lloyd was held. A temporary holding area for comparatively mild sentences.

Block B. Political crimes and celebrities; those deemed most likely to be targeted. Like Amidine.

Block C. Generally referred to as "Solitary." Heavier security measures for prisoners who behaved badly after internment, committed extreme crimes, or possessed physical talents that made them an active threat.

There was also a Block D, housing the medical ward where they treated injured prisoners...but our story is now centered around Block C—and the solitary confinement cells.

Here were housed perpetrators of the most heinous crimes, each sporting a magic sealing iron ball on their feet, courtesy of the Jiou monks.

And here was Amidine. Prisoners were on free time, but that didn't mean they were allowed to wander here—yet the guards were not the least bit

surprised to see him. They merely offered mild reprimands.

“What are you here for? You know this isn’t a place for fun and games.”

In lieu of an answer, Amidine slipped a few bills into the guard’s pocket. A bribe!

“Make it quick.”

“I know.”

With that brief exchange, Amidine was led to a particular solitary cell.

Behind that weighty door lay a spartan scene.

Unadorned, colorless walls. A toilet jutting from the corner. A sink full of limescale. It was not that much different from Block A, but the bed and furnishings were all fused with the floor. The sole source of sunlight was a tiny window fixed high above, unwashed for so long that the moss growing over it made it look more like green stained glass.

The space was so lifeless, it was like time itself had stopped.

A single day spent here would be enough to get you down.

A man sat on the bed within, keeping it together.

He was short in stature, and did not look especially memorable, but his eyes alone had a gleam to them. This was Zalko the Thief, the man who’d caused a stir across the world.

He was clad in prison garb, a gnarly chain around his ankles, with a hefty iron ball at the end.

“I dunno why you bother,” he said.

“Why, were you busy?” Amidine sneered. The cell did not offer much to occupy the mind.

Clearly, this was hardly Amidine’s first visit.

“Not really. Was getting bored playing chess against myself.”

“Chess? Huh.”

Zalko pulled a toy box out from under the bed, showing a board drawn on

paper, and wooden pieces.

“Not bad for solitary.”

“They were hard on me at first, but my fingers are so sticky the guards just gave up trying. They’ve got me in chains, but they’re not much better than a tight sweater.”

“And they’re just letting sleeping dogs lie.”

Zalko grinned.

“Guess they figured out I ain’t inclined to escape. They’re gotten real cavalier ’round me. They don’t even say nothing if they spot the chessboard.”

Zalko started laying pieces out on the paper board.

Pawns, bishops, kings distinguished by sloppily written letters, and black and white represented by the top of the piece either being indented or jutting out.

The actor was thrown off by the look of the pieces, but soon sat down to play.

For a moment, the only sound was the advancing pieces. In time, Amidine decided to broach the subject.

“We got a problem in Block A.”

“Oh? You’ve got Block B under wraps, so he must be bad. You tried to teach him one of your lessons?”

Amidine moved his next piece roughly.

“He’s the man who me sent here.”

“Huh? I thought it was King Sardin when your cover got blown?”

“Officially. Assume this guy’s bad enough they can’t disclose his identity.”

“Hard to believe, coming from a man who turned people into zombies and nearly overthrew Rokujou.”

Amidine slid a piece across the board near Zalko’s king, but rather than call checkmate, he got to the point.

“I’m getting outta here. I need your help.”

Zalko’s answer was silence.

“While Warden Urgd’s eyes are on the new guy, we’ve got a shot. The longer we stay, the harder it gets.”

Zalko grinned knowingly.

“So the warden told you to put the squeeze on this guy, but you blew it, and now you’re screwed? That piece of work will turn on prisoner or guard if they earn his ire.”

He swept the piece away from his king, and leaned in closer while looking Amidine in the eye.

“I get how you feel, and why. But I gotta say no.”

“Why? I guarantee your safety once we’re out.”

That didn’t seem to reassure Zalko.

“Do you now?”

“Don’t trust me? They didn’t find all the money I had squirreled away. That’s how I keep paying the guards to let me in here.”

“That’s not my concern. Like I said, I’m disinclined to escape at all.”

But the more Zalko retreated, the harder Amidine pressed.

“You’re outta the game? You, the great Zalko?”

This didn’t even anger the man. He just flashed a rueful grin.

“That’s right. I got spooked.”

Amidine looked taken aback at Zalko who owned up to the charge.

“But not scared of a failed escape?”

“Exactly. If I was so inclined...I could do *that* anytime.”

Checkmate or not, Zalko reached out and seized Amidine’s king.

“Oh? Done with chess, are we?” he said, baffled.

Zalko picked up his own king, too.

“I got bored, so I pilfered odds and ends under the guards’ noses, making these pieces. They think you can’t do anything with little bits of wood...but

they're not just for chess."

Like a teacher showing the results of an experiment to their students, Zalko joined the top parts of the two kings.

There was a click...and they locked together. Amidine's eyes went wide.

"That wasn't just how you tell them apart?"

"Each of them's short, but combine 'em, and you'll get a decent sized stick. There are thirty-two pieces, so you get sixteen sticks. Run a piece of string through the ends..."

"And you've got a rope ladder."

Zalko grinned.

"You get me? I can run whenever I want."

"I get that...so why make it?"

"Like I said, just killing time. I get to play chess, and mock the guards. Win-win."

Less an escape plan than a way to demean the staff.

Amidine looked impressed, but soon started to frown.

"But if you can do that, I really don't get why you'd stay put."

A reasonable question, and a shadow passed over Zalko's face.

"Not much different from your own story, really. I ran up against someone real bad, and got myself sent here."

"That was after I was behind bars, so I don't know what happened. Mind sharing your story?"

Zalko hadn't told anyone his past before and wasn't sure where to begin. He scratched his head, thinking.

"Not much to it, really. I was an ordinary craftsman, once. Good with my hands, sure of myself, thought I had it made."

"That's a shock. Most thieves never had a proper line of work."

"But I wasn't much of a people person. I knew I could do the work, but I

couldn't convince anyone to give me a shot. Yet clearly less-skilled artisans started making a name for 'emselves, and I couldn't take it. I snapped and blew the whistle on my boss's secret ledger. Under a false name."

"So your first crime was revealing your boss's crooked books?"

"It felt great. 'They're all talking about me!' I couldn't get it out of my mind, so I pulled a few more stunts, and soon enough I was getting underworld clients and working full-time as Zalko."

He picked and chose his jobs, for the aesthetics—the artistic streak he'd had as a craftsman led to him being particular about his crimes.

"Eventually I started to buy my own bullshit and overreached. I went after the king of Azami... Sorry, I don't even want to think about it."

"And the fallout got you nabbed. I know how that feels."

They shared sympathetic looks, not yet aware that the same boy had beaten them both up.

"So with a real bad customer breathing down my neck, I figured jail was safer."

"Who're we talking about?" Amidine asked. Same one as you, buddy.

But Zalko just hung his head. Amidine rose to leave, giving up on recruiting him.

"Consider me convinced. Guess I'll have to escape on my own."

"Think you can?"

"I wanted you along for insurance. But I've figured out a route during penal labor. Getting on Urgd's good side let me pull a few strings. Took three months to make it big enough for someone to slip through."

"Then take this. Present from me. No use hanging onto it without anyone to play against."

"Appreciated."

Zalko pulled a linen pouch from under the bed, put the chess set inside, and handed it over.

“Unravel the bag, and you’ll have the rope you need. Still...”

“What?”

“The dangerous man who sent you here, he doesn’t sound like the type to end up imprisoned.”

That was exactly what had been bothering Amidine.

“Yeah, I agree. Didn’t seem like he was here to finish me off, but his crimes all seemed doctored.”

They’d doctored the hell out of them.

Zalko caught his drift, groaning.

“Ohhh...so he’s undercover. After Warden Urgd?”

“Yeah, I mentioned the weirdness with the prisoner movements. That warden’s using prisoners for something bad, and I bet he’s looking into it.”

“Well, as long as it’s not a threat to me, I got nothing to say.”

Amidine slung the bag over his shoulder and gave Zalko a nod.

“I won’t be back. Thanks for the parting gift.”

“Be well.”

The last time they’d ever see each other...or so they thought. In fact, they’d soon be reunited, in tears.

But oblivious to their fateful link to Lloyd Belladonna, for now, they bid adieu like two hotshots.

The second day of Lloyd’s unwitting prison life.

Block A and B prisoners were gathered in the mess hall for breakfast, and Lloyd was happily sitting behind a basic tray of ham, potato salad, and a bread roll.

“Potato salad?” Minoxin inquired. “Young Allan loved that. As a child, he used to cry if we left it out of his lunch box.”

Delightful stories of Allan’s childhood in one ear, Lloyd chuckled, “Ah-ha-ha, so what’s on our schedule today?”

“Um, we cleaned already, so...oh.”

Minox looked tired already.

“What?”

“I believe it’s hard labor outside, today. Paving the streets, setting up scaffolding... Rough on these old bones.”

The secretary had a gloomy expression, like he’d just learned they were running a marathon in gym class.

“A sound mind resides in a sound body!” Lloyd declared. “Let’s just take it as a good workout! Build ourselves some mental fortitude!”

He gave Minox an encouraging smile, completely oblivious to the fact that this was not, in fact, a training camp.

“Thank you, Lloyd. It’s just...lately several people have gone missing in rockfalls, so do take care. Oh?”

As they were speaking, a heavysset, thuggish prisoner from Block B approached Minox.

“Grandpa, at your age you must be full. I’ll finish that for you.”

“Er, no...I’m not yet...”

“I know, your sentence is almost up. You don’t wanna make trouble and get an extra year or two tacked on, do you?”

The man had decided Minox couldn’t fight him, and was here to relieve him of his bread roll. The guards were clearly turning a blind eye to this sort of deal.

“Block A clowns might be freaking out about your rep, but you can’t fool me. Gimme that thing.”

He was very persistent. But Lloyd was hardly one to let a bad deed go unremarked.

“That is not right!” he said.

Having a little kid scold him just made the man scowl. “Hah? None of your business, newbie. Butt out.”

Lloyd did no such thing. “I get that you’re hungry, but if you’re on the diet course, you shouldn’t be eating anyone else’s share.”

“D-diet course...?”

Several other prisoners glanced at his rotund belly, snickering.

“Oh, sorry, were you here for the mental fortitude only? It’s still wrong!”

Lloyd was being totally serious, but both allegations only sounded like insults. The heavysset prisoner was not about to take either remark about his figure lying down.

“Y-you little...!”

“You are a very obstinate man! I can see that.”

Lloyd stood up and walked away—to the corner where Amidine sat.

“Amidine.”

The sudden appearance of his mortal enemy made Amidine spray milk everywhere.

“*Pfft!* Wh-what?”

Lloyd fixed Amidine with a grave look.

“Um, Amidine, you’re the leader of Block B, right?”

Less a leader than the top dog, but...close enough.

Amidine nodded. “Y-yeah.”

“That man who’s trying to help himself to other people’s food won’t listen to me. Can you tell him off for me? Tell him that’s wrong!”

“Y-you want me to...”

“Who else? You’re lacking in morality and responsibility. It’s time you developed them!”

Amidine and his minions recoiled from Lloyd’s words, then jumped to their feet and ran over to Minox.

They surrounded the heavysset prisoner, who was left reeling by the whole thing.

“A-Amidine, what’s going on? This kid—”

“Behave!” Amidine said, sounding like a class president. Minox—and everyone else in the room—gaped at him. The minions’ eyes turned to Lloyd, desperately seeking approval. Positively groveling.

“That should do it!”

“But, uh...” The accused still wasn’t buying it.

Amidine’s eyes gleamed. “Do you not know right from wrong? Do you not value your life?!”

“N-no, no, no, no, I’ll never do it again!”

He got Amidine’s threat at least, and offered Minox and Lloyd an apology, then fled.

That left the cafeteria buzzing.

“Yo, look at Amidine! He’s beside himself!”

“So the stories were true?”

“Amidine tried to put the squeeze on him, and he turned the tables!”

Lloyd had even spooked Amidine.

The whole prison had heard the story, but even seeing it for themselves was hard to believe.

Yet in that instant, Lloyd ascended to the pinnacle of Hell’s Lock’s hierarchy. Naturally, he remained blissfully unaware of this.

The outgoing prisoner put his arm round Lloyd.

“You’ve done it again, Lloyd! Boss man Lloyd! I’m following you now!”

“N-no, there’s no need to follow me anywhere. I just stated the truth!”

Lloyd’s side of the room was celebrating.

Meanwhile, Amidine sat back down, feeling miserable. What was he, Lloyd’s errand boy?

He’d publicly demonstrated that he was beneath Lloyd, and that would be tough to bounce back from.

“Argh...gotta grin and bear it. Just till I get outta here...”

His face twisted in anguish.

And one other man was watching the prison power structure be upended.

“That snot-nosed brat...”

Warden Urgd.

Lloyd had given him lip upon entry. His successful defeat of Amidine, and his blithe attitude...it was all making him livid.

He was watching the cafeteria through the door, and his frustrations got the best of him—he was within prison grounds, yet lit up a cigar anyway. Nobody dared reproach him for it. He stumped off down the hall, muttering.

“Have the kid replace Amidine... No, if I give him free rein, it’ll get to his head.”

Urgd was the kind of man who simply couldn’t have things not go his way.

“Amidine’s my pawn, and he can still order most inmates around. Lloyd’s new, doesn’t fear me yet, and he’s using that cute mug like a crafty grifter. I don’t like it.”

The cute face part was totally his prejudice. Urgd had the soul of an old battle ax who honed in on all the sweet young things. Few of us are truly free of that.

After pondering the problem, Urgd had a bright idea, and grinned maliciously.

“Right, his type doesn’t work like Amidine. Even if I were to pamper him well, he’d turn on me in time. It’s best to just kill him. Make it look like an accident, like always.”

He nodded delightedly, certain he’d figured out the right plan. Though it seemed like he’d merely concocted a rationale to justify his urge to bump Lloyd off.

“That’s settled! Let’s get the ball rolling.”

Warden Urgd tossed his cigar in the hall behind him, shoved his hands in his pockets, and headed back to his office.

Their pleasant breakfast ended, and the prisoners were sent out to pave some

roads.

A common type of penal labor.

Yet undoubtedly, one of the most grueling.

Steep mountains, valleys full of monsters—Hell's Lock was surrounded by natural prison walls. Still, it had not been built here solely to make escape difficult.

True, one false step and you'd die because of the terrain. Thus, there was a need to carve a *safe* passage through these mountains—and the site had been chosen with an eye toward having prisoners do just that. Both today and in yesteryear, few felt any guilt over assigning dangerous work to criminals. Take Rokujou, for example—their famous magic stones were often mined by inmates.

High-risk, hard manual labor—truly is a *punishment*.

To pay for their sins, the prisoners were hauled up a road that was little better than a game trail, near a sheer cliff face.

Tying ropes from waist to waist, under the watchful eyes of the guards, they broke down boulders, flattening the terrain so supplies could reach the construction site.

Lloyd put a really positive spin on those ropes.

“This is how they foster cooperation!”

Minox grimaced.

“Well, no one can escape on their own...so you're not entirely wrong.”

But with Lloyd ascending the ranks of the social order, the other prisoners all took him at his word.

“Right you are, Lloyd! Nice spin!”

They were definitely in “praise his every action” mode. They'd all done their share of misdeeds but were all smiling like friendly neighbors.

“Okay, everyone! Let's make sure to work safe today!”

“““Aye-aye!””””

Lloyd was barking orders like a carpenter to his apprentices. Minox was impressed.

“You are a natural leader, Lloyd. I witnessed it with Lord Threonine as well—how easily you can worm your way into others’ hearts.”

Rope bridges, unsteady footing, chipping away at the rock face with little tangible progress—it was frustrating work, and ordinarily tempers ran high. But not today.

Faced with this solidarity, even the most watchful of guards found themselves smiling, and murmuring, “If only they were always like this.”

But one man stood above the cliffs, watching this with palpable rage.

“You think you’re the boss here, do you, Lloyd Belladonna?”

You guessed it—Warden Urgd. The way Lloyd had defeated his pawn and unwittingly brought the other inmates together was really irritating him.

“The prisoners around him are gonna start acting like they own the place when they’re supposed to be living in fear of what the guards might do next.”

He was staring through a telescope, grinding his teeth, but then he grinned.

“Except too much attention works against you. The nail that sticks out gets hammered in. Though in your case, it’s not ‘hammered in’ so much as ‘offed.’”

Urgd eyed the scaffold Lloyd was working on, smirking. He had a switch in his hand—likely a remote detonator.

“Unstable footing, a sudden collapse...happens all the time during harsh penal labor. At least once a month, nothing to be done.”

Accidental workplace deaths were one way to keep the supply of corpses steady.

This method often provided several cadavers at once and helped remove inmates who’d earned his ire—and was easily excused, so he often used it.

Fiddling with the switch like a toy, Urgd was already gloating.

“I live for this shit—being able to sweep clean these scumbags. Feels good, like when you pull a giant hunk of wax out your ear. Societal parasites are all

worth the same.”

He put his thumb on the switch. Although nobody was watching, he still made a show of it. It just served as proof of how vile he was.

“Remotely detonated magic stones... My, my, what a world we live in. You can clean out the trash from a safe distance, without getting your hands dirty.”

Urgd bided his time and bided his time, and when he saw Lloyd’s group laughing— “Buh-bye!”

He pressed the switch. The ground abruptly collapsed beneath them. Screams, shouts, and a puff of dust.

“I don’t care how good a grifter you are, or how hardened a criminal. Humans are so easy to kill. Count yourself lucky, Lloyd Belladonna. Your corpse will be put to good use, and turned into something far harder to put down.”

An unreasonable demand, to be sure. Urgd’s shoulders and belly shook with mirth...but his hopes were soon dashed.

The prisoners were bound with ropes around their waists, so if one fell, they all did. They were shackled together.

But only if they were *ordinary* humans.

“Wh.....whaaat?!”

Lloyd had monstrous strength, capable of jumping around mountains and valleys like they were his playground. He could easily catch a dozen men on his back from a crumbling foothold like he was jumping down stairs with a laden backpack.

Everyone was safe—both prisoners on the scaffold, and guards below. Lloyd had kicked the pieces of the scaffold in midair, assuring they’d hit nobody, but that went unnoticed.

“““W-whoa...”””

The inmates’ impressed cry reached Urgd’s ears.

After doing some complicated gymnastics, Lloyd landed and looked no worse for wear, save for maybe a few scuffs on his uniform. Despite the accident, he

earned a round of applause.

“Mm? Huh? Yo, what the...huh?”

Urgd stared down at the scene, waffling between incomprehension and indignation. It was extremely silly-looking and would have gotten him boffolas on vaudeville.

It had never occurred to the warden that his assassination attempt might *fail*. He couldn't believe his eyes. If he had been watching closely, he might have witnessed Lloyd's acrobatics...but even if he had, he likely wouldn't have understood it. It was hardly rational.

Ultimately, Urgd just chalked it up to good luck.

His confusion gave way to fury. His knuckles grasped the telescope so tight, it cracked.

“Dammit,” he swore. “Not enough explosives? A miraculous landing? What are you, blessed?”

He soon pushed his irritation aside, chuckling.

“Bwa...ha-ha-ha! Fine, so be it! You know what this means? I know what this means! You want me to torment him! Torture him until he begs for mercy! That's your fate here, Lloyd Belladonna!”

Lloyd couldn't have possibly heard him, but Urgd took that for a yes.

“Suit yourself! I'll make you suffer until you wish that fall had killed you!”

His own failure just made Urgd even more sadistic, and he waddled away, cackling.

The scene of the collapse was still in an uproar.

But Lloyd was cheerily going, “That was close! A surprise scaffold collapse!” and had effortlessly performed a technical landing carrying a dozen other prisoners—so he soon found himself the subject of thunderous applause.

“Damn! That was wild, Lloyd!”

“Oh, no, it was nothing.”

Sheepishly, he set the stack of prisoners down.

Minox was among them. He straightened out his glasses and nodded, smiling.

“Thanks for saving us, Lloyd. I’m shocked we had yet *another* scaffold collapse. Most alarming.”

Lloyd frowned at that remark.

“Does this happen a lot?”

Lloyd’s heated tone rattled Minox.

“Er, um...rather often? But that’s how it goes.”

He meant prison labor was used specifically *because* there was a high-risk factor.

But unaware that he was in jail at all, Lloyd was fuming. “They’re getting paid for this, but they don’t even verify the safety of it?” he said. “And this happens often? If I hadn’t kicked the scaffold away, people below could have been hurt!”

Cheeks puffed out, Lloyd turned and stalked off toward the guards.

Minox hastily tried to stop him.

“L-Lloyd! Don’t start things... I don’t want to make waves and prolong my stay!”

His sentence was almost up. Minox wanted to taste freedom again, so he was keeping his head down.

But Lloyd was not dissuaded.

“No, these things must be said. Who’s in charge here?”

He looked around. Ordinarily, the guards acted resolute around the prisoners, but at the moment, they were just as rattled. They wound up responding like they would to any professional colleague.

“I am,” one said, raising a hand. The veteran guard, Astax.

Lloyd approached him, demanding an account of the incident.

“Were these scaffolds checked in advance? I’ve heard this happens all the time! That’s so dangerous! Someone could have sprained an ankle!”

Astax thought far worse than that could have happened, but given the

circumstances, the guards did bear the blame; he couldn't bring himself to retaliate.

"S-sorry. We *do* check ahead, normally..."

"You say that, but the accident says otherwise. You're being paid for this, so earn your keep!"

He was here for a training camp and was speaking as a customer. Regardless of the truth.

The rest of the prisoners were all chorusing, "Yeah!" and the guards didn't have a leg to stand on. They stood in glum silence, listening.

They were concerned this could escalate into a riot, but Lloyd had no such plans, so he quickly turned his attention back to work.

"We can't continue work on that scaffold, so what should we do instead?"

That garnered him a wave of surprise from the prisoners. "We're not done?"

"Lloyd," the outgoing prisoner said. "This is our chance to slack off!"

"Not at all," Lloyd said, firmly. "You've got to get past that mindset. That's not why we're here, is it? If you're still thinking like that, you can never leave with your head held high."

Lloyd totally intended this to be a successful mental-fortitude training.

But the prisoners all heard it as, "Get yourself clean and go on the straight and narrow, my brother!" It was full-on encouragement, with love.

""""We're with you, boss!""""

"Uh, thanks? Anyway, supervisors, we're all motivated, so give them a new program! I'll just go clean up that scaffolding."

Lloyd cheerily began piling up the metal beams. The prisoners couldn't help but admire his work ethic.

"I'm game!"

"I'll help!"

"Me too!"

It was like the part in a sports movie when the members finally become a team.

The guards said nothing, and just maintained their silence. This could have been a real disaster—killing several guards along with the prisoners. The fact that they'd been chalking up the regular accidents as part of the job made them all feel a little guilty.

That silence was broken by Astax.

"Once the scaffolding's clear, let's prioritize paving the ground. Any guards who have time, check the scaffolding, and determine the cause of the accident."

"R-right."

With that, Astax fell silent.

"What's wrong?" a guard asked.

"Mm, the boy has a point. Given where we're working, I didn't think much of the accidents, but...they are a bit frequent."

"Warden Urgd said this terrain is just that dangerous."

That name made Astax's frown deepen.

"Yeah...but the accident rate's gone up since he took charge."

That made the other guard ask, "Where'd that guy come from, anyway? I thought for sure you were gonna be the next warden."

"He didn't know much about our jobs when he arrived, so he must have been in some other line of work. But he hasn't said much about it."

The more he thought about it, the more it added up to bad news.

Astax tried to shake it off, looking at Lloyd again.

The boy's behavior on his admission to Hell's Lock had seemed odd to the veteran guard. The way he'd responded to the accident was also not how any normal prisoner would react.

"I wonder if he's a spy sent to investigate the accidents?"

That would explain how he'd treated Urgd. (But really, the boy just thought this was some sort of symposium.) "It's possible, but I can't say for sure."

He'd just have to wait and find out. Astax decided to keep that thought to himself.

Meanwhile, back in Azami, on the top floor of the Adventurer Guild...

"Oh, crap, oh crap! I can't think of anything!"

Rinko was rarely ever beside herself.

She'd accidentally sent Lloyd to prison and stuck a promising youngster with a record of indecent exposure, yet could think of no way to fix the mess.

"We need a very good excuse to retract that sentence, but even trying will likely make her suspect we're trying to investigate. If our cover is blown, it'll all be for nothing, and Lloyd will never be my son-in-law!"

Pictures of the girls and Alka were spinning before her eyes.

"If I wait too long, Alka's gonna sniff it out... I might be immortal, but she'll find a way to make me regret my inability to die!"

The plan to corner Eve, her son-in-law's record, and her own body—they were all blowing up.

"Hnggg...all things must pass!"

She was so frazzled she was quoting Buddha.

"Well, let's go dote on my daughter."

She was definitely the type of lady to escape life's pressures with a smoke and a highball. Although in her case, that meant her daughter—Marie.

"Games were always my escape! Having kids sure changes you."

Previously, the dramatic mother reveal (a ten-year absence followed by double peace signs) had blown Marie's mind so hard, she'd passed out. She'd been catatonic for three days and nights, and Alka had declared her unfit to call herself a reaction comedian.

When her symptoms had subsided, Marie had fled back to the shop, fearing she'd be forced to live as a princess. Also, because her mother was being far too

clingy.

While this exposition was occurring, Rinko reached Marie's shop on the East Side. She burst through the door with all the aggression of a SWAT team.

"All green! Clear! 'Sup, darling daughter!"

"Nobody's green here, Mom."

Marie snapped back but without her usual verve. Her mother had gone missing when she was a child, and she still hadn't quite worked out how to relate to her. Then add on the fact that she was immortal, Alka's old boss, and the Adventurer Guild master... it was a lot to process.

"Don't sweat the details, daughter. And don't be so stiff, darling."

Rinko, meanwhile, paid no heed to that awkwardness, coming hard and fast. She was like this 24/7, so to Marie, her mother was every bit as annoyingly goofy as Alka herself.

"Just be still and let me love you. It's been a hard week and Mommy's dead on her feet. In for a world of pain! Even at five percent odds, it'll feel like thirty percent of me is injured...in this baseball video game I got addicted to once."

"What are you even talking about?"

Grumbling, Marie hustled about making coffee. At least, this was definitely better than the kid grandma bursting out of the closet with underwear on her head. A sad reason to lower the bar.

"It's been open a while, so the scent's a bit weak."

"Not at all! I'd drink *swill* if my daughter brewed it!"

Rinko was definitely the type to find her child playing house and end up eating food made of mud. She brought doting to a dangerous degree.

She'd fled reality to have her daughter heal her soul. But I bet you see where this is going—the more you try and avoid the issue, someone's gonna bring it up.

And Marie brought it up.

"Is Lloyd still not back yet?"

“Hurp!”

The very thing she was trying to forget. Rinko did a spit take—a classic Marie gambit—they really were related.

“Wh-whyyyy would you ask that? He’s away for a week on an errand, yes?”

“Yeah, but with his legs, it should take two, three days tops.”

Everyone was saying that. Rinko had to argue the point.

“He was told to broaden his horizons! Maybe he’s out sightseeing and learning new things! Maybe he’s intentionally delaying his return, so you learn how to fend for yourself, because he just loves you that much!”

That was all a single breath. You repeat the same excuse enough, you end up sounding like you’re running an auction.

Marie was well aware she wasn’t great at taking care of herself. Since Lloyd had left, she hadn’t done the dishes, and there was mold growing on them, plus the laundry basket was overflowing.

“Hngg, true...I can’t rule that out...”

“See! It is a possibility! Seriously, at least do some laundry.”

Rinko was doing her best to change the subject. Marie was starting to worry less about Lloyd’s absence than her own future.

“True. I left it, assuming he’d be back before long...but I don’t wanna disappoint him.”

That mutter convinced Rinko she was off the hook.

But the instant she felt relieved—a second wave arrived!

“Sup, is Marie here?”

“We’re here to visit.”

“.....Are you still alive?”

Riho, Selen, Phyllo—the usual trio—were on their way home from school. Bearing gifts of takeout to keep Marie fed.

“I’m alive, geez,” Marie scoffed.

“Can you really handle more than three days without Lloyd?” Riho asked.

“I have been pursuing the papers daily in case they contained your obituary.”

“.....The headline: Tragic Femcel Succumbs to Sloth.”

“Oh, that’s just mean! Phyllo, people can survive a full week as long as they have water.”

“That is hardly knowledge to be proud of. But at least you’re alive for now.”

A rare sensible statement from Selen. They’d brought food, and looked relieved... These girls did care about each other, deep down.

Riho held up the takeout bag.

“Then you won’t be needing this,” she said.

“I do!” Rinko said, throwing her hands up like a little kid.

“Oh? What brings you here, Rinko?”

“Well, I’m a mom. I worry about my kid! What do we have here...oh, pizza! Taking that.”

She claimed to care about her daughter, yet was taking first dibs on the food. Clearly a pizzaholic.

“.....Going right for the salami. Good eye.”

“Seriously.”

Marie rolled her eyes, but she was always the one to grab the best slice, too. (She’d eat the back of a saury.) The girls all thought these two had a lot in common.

For a while they busied themselves with pizza and garlic bread, having a girls’ party.

But after a spout of aimless discussion, Selen said, “Oh, right, I’m glad you’re here, Rinko.”

Rinko looked up, mouth full of pizza.

“Mm? What?”

Riho looked at Marie and her mother.

“We were hoping to ask the info broker here. Word is, Lloyd was sighted near the Rokujou border... Have you heard anything else?”

“Hngack!”

Rinko coughed a bit, and Marie patted her back.

“What brought that on, Mom?”

“Guh-huck! Oh, nothing.”

Just when she was off the hook, they’d brought it back up, and she’d choked on her pizza. It would feel like she had something stuck in her throat for hours.

Marie gave her another thump, and answered:

“Isn’t that where the errand took him?”

“That’s what I *thought*,” Riho said, then elaborated. “But supposedly he got on some ominous wagon, and no one’s seen him since.”

“He was seen with that shield ruffian, Gaston,” Selen chimed in.

“.....Who emerged from the brush, like he was trying to remain unseen.”

Not wanting anyone to realize he’d been emptying his bowels, he’d been sneaking around...and aroused suspicion. And his build only added to it.

“I wondered if you knew anything, Marie. Gaston might be hiding critical info, too.”

Well aware what critical info he was hiding, Rinko was sweating buckets.

Noticing her expression, Selen chose to approach with kindness.

“You might be guild master, Rinko, but no one can know everything.”

But that just made things worse.

“Er, uh...thanks...”

Marie frowned.

“Yeah, this is the first I’ve heard of it. Even if Lloyd hopped on the wagon to really further broaden his horizons, the Gaston bit is pretty weird.”

Rinko spotted suspicions turning toward Gaston, and acted swiftly.

“Yes, perhaps Gaston is hiding something. I’ll give him the third degree later on.”

A real tight-rope act of deception, but Rinko successfully maneuvered through the subject, directing them back to normal girl talk.

“More importantly, how is school? Rinko wants to know!”

“Oh, you should be curious. If they wrote a novel about me and Lloyd, at school in love, I’m sure it would sell like hotcakes.”

Reserving comment. What proves popular is a mystery to us all.

“Spare her the fantasies. Stick to the facts!”

“.....We could write a non-fiction book about Riho’s misdeeds. That would sell.”

“Yo, Phyllo, what the... Show me the estimates, and I’ll consider it.”

Riho might not be much of a writer, but she would do anything for a buck.

Phyllo was often expressionless, but for once, there was a clear smirk on her face. She began to regale.

“.....The funniest one would definitely be the expired mint jelly.”

“Oh, that one! Yeah, I told Micona it was a balm for bruises and pawned the whole batch off on her.”

Pretty diabolical. But probably better than passing it off as a dessert.

Selen’s shoulders were shaking.

“Oh, how we laughed! She came back raving that it was sticky but effective!”

“.....The placebo effect only gets you so far. That really was a Micon moment.”

“Indeed. But we’d need her approval to put that in the book.”

“No way. We’ll just have to call her Mi●●na. You know she won’t approve jack shit.”

Riho sneered, Phyllo mocked, and Selen just piled it on.

Rinko found their conversation a relief, and was certain she was off the

hook...

But an instant later, the *last* person she expected destroyed her hopes.

She was doing her best “according to plan” smile, but moments like that are when you’re the most exposed, and when the unexpected is prone to happen. Especially when Lloyd’s around.

Rinko let out a sigh of relief, and raised her tea to her lips— “I’m back! Oh, everyone’s here!”

“—————Llooooooooooyd?! How are you hereeeeeeee?!”



Rinko screamed, spraying tea everywhere, unable to maintain her aplomb with the man himself in front of her.

But the others were reeling even harder.

After all, he was sporting a prison uniform, a distinctive look that could not be passed off as chic pinstripes. You could put this outfit in the hautest fashion rag around and nobody would buy that trend.

Every jaw dropped. They had believed themselves to be used to his outlandish behavior, but now lived to regret it. “We were fools.” “No one can possibly predict him.”

While everyone stared at him like they would stare at...an escaped convict, he just launched into an update.

“If we’re all here, that saves time! I don’t have much, so let’s keep this quick.”

“Uh, Lloyd...if you’re short on time...what’s with those duds?” Riho asked.

“Oh, do you like them?” Lloyd asked, smiling like it was a compliment.

If this was his look, his life was over, but no one dared point that out.

“Uh, Lloyd...so many questions...”

“Marie, are you eating properly? Have you done the dishes?”

Given his clothes, they were far more worried about his diet, and how much slop it involved, but again...they chose silence. Question marks were floating over every head.

“Let Chrome and the others know I might be back late, please! Still, I hope you can learn to at least clean up after yourself.”

“N-no, wait, Lloyd...why will you be back late? And why are you dressed for an internment camp?”

Selen at last managed to inquire about the prison uniform, but Lloyd just brightened up.

“Oh, you’ve heard of it? That’s where I am right now! I wondered if it was famous.”

“Not the word I’d use...”

“Yeah, I’m at a camp for mental-fortitude training! I’m trying to build some, and I was planning on being back earlier, but it looks like this’ll last the full week.”

He seemed to find the experience deeply fulfilling, so nobody could hit back too hard.

“.....It *would* strengthen the psyche,” Phyllo muttered. “But why there?”

Lloyd caught that and wheeled toward Rinko, bowing.

“Gaston from the Adventurer Guild hooked me up with a slot at a camp called Hell’s Lock! I’m sure you’ve heard about it, Rinko! Let Gaston know I’m grateful he let me take his spot, and will make it up to him later!”

Rinko was still coughing up tea, so she barely managed a nod.

Lloyd looked like he’d said his piece and bowed.

“Sorry, I gotta get back!”

He smiled and waved his hand, then hopped up on the roof, using *Aero* to blast himself across the mountains.

He’d been back for only three minutes and left everyone as exhausted as if they’d survived a hurricane.

Then everyone glared at Rinko with such intensity that they forgot their fatigue.

“Explain,” Marie hissed.

Riho, Selen, and Phyllo’s eyes had all lost their light.

“Give us your best excuse.”

“It had better be a convincing one.”

“.....Please.”

Lloyd specifically addressing her had robbed Rinko of the last leg she could stand on, and she lurched backwards.

“Argh, and here I was covering so well! That’s Lloyd for you, even makes *me*

want to go take a nap.”

His abrupt arrival had exposed everything and left her drenched in sweat. While Marie and the cadets...looked grim. Like she was in the box with four veteran cops.

Rinko scrambled for an excuse that would allow her to preserve state secrets...

Marie broke the silence.

“Mom.”

“Yes, that’s me!”

“Don’t.”

Was this how families talked?

“You’re gone my whole life, and return immortal—sending me into a coma. But I’m not holding your feet to the fire about *that*.”

“Such a dismissive way to talk about the greatest concern of my life...”

Selen cut into the questionable family conference.

“Marie’s dealt with Chief Alka, so she’s used to it.”

“It’s way out there, but in hindsight—it’s a reasonable concern. Far better than Alka’s habit of threatening to destroy countries that mildly annoy her.”

“.....A regular resilience builder.”

A comparison that just made you pity Rinko.

“But Sir Lloyd is the focus here. What on earth led to him being sent to prison?”

“Uh, so...I’m not gonna convince anyone if I say he’s there to broaden his horizons, huh?”

Even Phyllo’s brow furrowed.

“.....Obviously.”

Marie hit the table so hard the teacups hung air.

“The pathetic way you lie is *exactly* like Master Alka!”

“Wh-why I never! I’m not even lying! I’m just hiding the truth!”

“That’s worse! Geez Louise.”

No one had made her course correct for a whole century, and Rinko had survived entirely through lies and conceit. It was like hiding stuff was an integral part of her identity.

“Every lady’s got a secret or two. You gotta seem mysterious if you want Lloyd to notice you.”

“We’re talking about Lloyd!” Riho said, glaring at her.

“...I’m the most mysterious here,” Phyllo said, proudly.

Rinko nodded approvingly. “The Japan Mysterious Lady Club officially approves saying very little as the first step to cultivating an air. By their principles, Phyllo is the clear leader of your little group.”

“.....Woo.”

Phyllo threw up peace signs to celebrate, but Selen was baring her fangs.

“Woo, my belt! Phyllo simply doesn’t go to the effort of having actual thoughts.”

Selen was likely the *least* mysterious of the group, and judging by the note of panic in her voice, she was well aware.

The discussion threatened to head awry, but Marie put a stop to it.

“Wait! She’s got you on a tangent again! You can’t let your guard down for a second!”

Rinko stuck her tongue out, and rapped the side of her head with her knuckles.

“Whoopsie-daisy! Best you listen to my daughter!”

“Spill the beans, now,” Marie growled.

Riho, Selen, and Phyllo all leaned over the table, making their scariest faces.

“There ain’t no right to secrecy where Lloyd’s concerned.”

“No human rights remain whatsoever.”

“.....If you keep squirming.....it'll be more than a love tap.”

Rinko tried to look innocent, but the girls' frowns just deepened. She soon threw in the towel and decided to confess everything.

“Man, Lloyd sure is loved.”

With that, she launched into a clear explanation of the incident's timeline, hiding nothing.

The mechanical weapons from the last fight had used bioparts likely sourced from dead prisoners. They'd picked Gaston to investigate, worked up a rap sheet, and arranged for him to infiltrate the prison.

And...he'd run into Lloyd at the border, fallen afoul of one of the boy's patented misunderstandings, and been replaced. They were now desperately trying to unravel the ensuing mess. Having a prior for indecent exposure was really *not great*.

This left the girls having...mixed emotions. Lloyd's bottomless enthusiasm and capacity for confusion equally evoked admiration and consternation.

“You shouldn't have hidden all that, Mom...but I also can't really blame you.”

“Yeah, when things get that bad...”

“Sir Lloyd is perhaps...too amazing.”

“.....Mm.”

For a while, everyone nodded to themselves.

“Well, there you have it. Not *entirely* my fault, so save corporal punishments for Gaston.”

“Try not selling your own men out, Mom. Still, wow. Worst-case scenario, Lloyd's gone for a while. And I'm hung out to dry.”

Selen rolled her eyes at Marie. Clearly, she lacked the very notion of doing her own housework.

“Like mother, like daughter.”

“To my shame,” Rinko said, bowing. Then she addressed the problem at large. “Naturally, we could forcibly order his return. But each prisoner transfer increases the likelihood of Eve realizing we’re onto her, and scuttling her plans. Anyone got any better ideas?”

If this was a minor problem, they could easily have gone, “It’s your problem,” “Leave us out,” but...if they had a shot at stopping the lady manipulating all that mess with Jiou behind the scenes, and if Lloyd was already involved, then it demanded serious thought. It was like eighty percent saving Lloyd, and twenty percent stopping Eve.

“How sure are we she’s messing with this Hell’s Lock place?” Riho asked.

“A solid eighty to ninety percent sure. But we don’t have solid evidence, so we’re looking to find dirt to go after Profen with. If we push too hard and she destroys the lab before we find it, that’ll suck.”

Hell’s Lock was an international prison—tough for any one kingdom to forcibly investigate without solid grounds for doing so. If they made the attempt, and failed to secure the site of this unethical prisoner processing—well, Eve was King of Profen, and would absolutely make them pay for it.

And if she suspected Rinko’s hand at work...that might really ruin plans.

“Eve...President Eva would hardly let us live our failures down. Founding a new country in that day and age—that isn’t a skill you lose over time.”

Eve and Rinko had feared each other, and spent much of their time trying to rein the other in. The biggest advantage Azami had was that Eve was unaware Rinko was back in the game. They couldn’t afford to lose that.

“And if Eve returns to our world immortal, she’ll gain absolute power. We must stop that at all costs.”

Rinko was muttering to herself, uncharacteristically grim. It was hard for the cadets to interrupt.

But her daughter had no such compunctions.

“Still, Mom, if Eve finds out Lloyd’s in her prison, that’s also bad. I’ll wither away if he doesn’t come home soon, so we’d best handle this ASAP. I mean,

have you seen the mold on those plates?”

“Fix that your damn self, Marie,” Riho snarled.

Perhaps it was too late for Marie to acquire housekeeping skills.

“Getting Lloyd out of there is step one of solving this mess! It’ll rid him of his charges, and there must be a good way to find evidence on Eve at the same time!”

“Much as I want to keep hitting the ‘clean your own place’ nail, I’m with you on Sir Lloyd. His existence may be a sin, but having legit crimes pinned to his name is hardly appropriate.”

Everyone agreed Selen was far better fit for that, but no one said it aloud. It wouldn’t have sounded like they were joking.

Suddenly, Marie’s eyes went wide.

“.....What is it, Marie? An idea?”

Inspiration struck. Marie smiled at Phyllo, then turned toward Rinko.

“Mom, you know...I can’t remember you ever really being much of a parent to me.”

Her wheedling tone caused Rinko’s defenses to go up.

“Wh-where’s this going, Marie?”

“I just thought it was time you acted like a real mom. And let your daughter call in a favor.”

“That does make it hard to refuse...and also terrifying...”

Rinko shuddered, and Marie’s grin broadened.

“I want you to send us to the prison. Immediately.”

Rinko looked dubious.

“I feel like sending you to prison is pretty far outside the umbrella of parenting.”

Most parents would feel downright bad about snitching.

Riho asked the obvious question.

“But female prisoners aren’t sent to Hell’s Lock. They go elsewhere.”

Marie smirked, like she’d been waiting for that response.

“There’s one job even girls can do that will make our investigation *easy*. Medical ward staff.”

Rinko blinked. That had not occurred to her.

“It takes time to fake paperwork for guards and prisoners, but doctors? You can whip that up in no time. And pass them off as temporary help, or substitutes...this might just be a great idea.”

But her enthusiasm soon faded, and she shook her head.

“Marie could do the job. With this shop, and your medical knowledge, you’d work out fine. But it’s too dangerous. Anyone closely involved going there might blow the operation. I’d be better off going myself—as a nurse.”

“There’s no demand for mom cosplay! I can just see Dad getting all worked up—I forbid it!”

A reasonable complaint.

“Time is of the essence, Mom. Doctors can check the list of the dead, figure out what’s faked, and maybe even pin down the location from that.”

Her daughter was motivated, and Rinko sighed.

“Who do you take after? Sixty percent me, forty percent Alka.”

Thus, the girls prepared to infiltrate Hell’s Lock...and with the assassins Alka had sent in, they would raise the curtains on pure chaos.

Chapter 2

Dutiful Desertion: A Prison Break Like a New Employee Who Thinks the Boss Means It When He Says to Go Home

Now then, I'm sure you're all wondering how Lloyd came to show his smile at the shop.

To find out what led to that...we've got to turn back the clock.

Evening, Hell's Lock, Block A.

Lloyd had effortlessly prevented Urgd's construction accident. Penal labor had ended without further incident, and everyone had returned to their cells.

Then Urgd rolled in, fuming—accompanied by a prisoner with a makeshift arm sling. The same heavysset fellow who'd gone after Minox that morning.

"Um, what is it?" Lloyd asked, tilting his head.

"Wipe that smile off your face," Urgd said, grinning maliciously. "You really did it this time, Lloyd Belladonna."

"Oh?"

"You see his injury? Nothing to say for yourself?"

His attitude suggested Lloyd had caused it.

"Oh, oww! It hurts!"

It seemed like the failure of his earlier strategy meant he'd bribed this other prisoner into helping him concoct a rationale to send Lloyd to solitary. It was bit of a reach.

But Lloyd had no clue what this was about—obviously—and mulled it over.

"I think even in the diet course, you've gotta have a proper breakfast. Bones become fragile without adequate nutrition. I'd suggest fish—white fish, and maybe more seaweed, too."

This was way off the mark on several levels, but Lloyd was using his experience working at a cafeteria to offer appropriate recommendations.

And that caused a stir in the room as the other prisoners were impressed with his wit.

Warden Urgd just got angrier.

“So you intend to feign innocence, Lloyd Belladonna? Hiding things won’t help. You did this!”

“No, I haven’t treated anyone’s wounds. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Not the treatment! You broke his arm! It’ll take months to heal!”

“Whaaat? Three months? Broken bones never take more than a few hours! You really need better breakfasts.”

Lloyd was being totally serious, but no ordinary human would take it that way.

Even faced with the warden’s threats, Lloyd kept his cool, and responded with a joke. The prisoners were impressed. Even those who were certain Lloyd hadn’t hurt anyone.

Oblivious to the hubbub, Lloyd began to talk about low-carb diets. Urgd took this as mockery and felt his temperature rising.

“Lloyd Belladonna!” he roared. “You’re being sent to solitary! No arguments!”

Beside himself, he ignored the voices shouting that it was a setup, and moved on to punishment.

“Solitary? Is that like a tailored program?”

“Heh-heh-heh...you’re still smiling? I’m almost impressed. Yeah, I’m gonna show you a tailored program just for you.”

“That’s nice of you. Does it cost extra?”

Non-stop sarcasm...or what read as that, at least. The boy himself never doubted this place was committed to getting results.

The room echoed with laughter.

“What a badass! Lloyd’s the best around!”

“Take him awaaaaay!” Urgd yelled, slapping a guard’s backside.

They put their hands under his arms.

“Mm? Oh, I don’t require an escort... Wow, this program really does everything!”

“Lloyd,” Minox called out, concerned. “Do be careful!”

“Uh, okay!”

“I doubt anything will really affect you, but...”

Personally aware of just how nuts the boy could be, Minox sat back down. He was concerned like you would be for a small child running to the corner store. No more.

But someone else was watching like a hawk.

“Is this my chance?” Amidine muttered underneath his breath.

Warden Urgd, the guards, even the other prisoners—everyone’s eyes were on Lloyd, and that might be his shot at a clean getaway.

“Uh, Amidine, are you...”

“Tell the others. Tonight’s our night.”

His minions gulped. The boss had said the word—tonight, the Rising Blue Dragon would stage a prison break.

“Make sure the guards don’t catch on. Double-check each man’s role before lights out.”

“Yes, Boss.”

Amidine felt himself tensing up.

This was more stressful than any film shoot. He laughed at himself for it.

“When Lloyd showed up, I thought I was finished...but now the wind’s blowing my way.”

But at the time, Amidine could not be sure if that wind was in his sails, or against them.

Taken aback by the whole thing, Lloyd was handcuffed and led to Block C, where the solitary cells were located.

It was even more gloomy and oppressive than Block A, and the footsteps sounded like horror film Foley.

Tap, tap, tap, echoing through darkened corridors.

At length, they reached a sturdy door that was reinforced with so much iron, merely opening it seemed like an improbable feat. It had multiple locks, as if adamantly thwarting any intruder.

“Wow, a private room? You shouldn’t have.”

Lloyd merely registered this as first-rate security. Which...wasn’t technically wrong! Like the opposite of an auto-lock.

This was all just fueling his notion that he was getting the VIP treatment.

“This’ll be your room.”

“Oh, okay! Thank you so much! How long can I stay here?”

“Dunno. Depends on the warden’s mood... Poor kid.”

He must have seen a number of prisoners bear the brunt of Urgd’s enmity. His eyes showed only sympathy.

Entirely oblivious to the guard’s expression, Lloyd simply examined the accoutrements, as if he’d just been escorted to the VIP suite.

The furnishings, fused to the floor—to his eyes, this was simply advanced technology.

“Well, it’s a very consistent aesthetic! You must have a good interior designer.”

The room did not have a single trace of warmth, as it was designed purely for punishment—yet he saw this as “cutting-edge minimalism.” Viewed through that filter, even the exposed toilet was merely avant-garde.

Incidentally, Lloyd was carrying the ball chained to his foot around under one arm like a purse. It really made you wonder if there was any point to its existence.

“Am I supposed to just keep this on? It is a diet thing? Or does it have some fatigue-draining magnetism? They really spare no expense!”

Treating an iron ball like you would treat tourmaline or a magnetic necklace was very Lloyd. It’s hard to blame him when it was utterly failing in its intended function.

While Lloyd was busy being impressed with the decor and shackles, a voice floated in from somewhere nearby.

“You new here? Tough break.”

Lloyd looked around, searching for the source of the voice, and found a small mouse-sized hole of an air duct leading to the next cell.

“What an innovative communication system!” he gasped.

He moved over to the duct to answer.

“Hey, hi! I’m not sure how long I’ll be here, but it’s nice to make your acquaintance, neighbor!”

The occupant seemed impressed with Lloyd’s manners.

“You sure have nerves of steel. What’re you in for?”

“Um, nothing I’m aware of. They said the warden just had his eyes on me!”

“Ah...that is a tribulation.”

The speaker seemed sympathetic.

“But here, I can really work on myself!” Lloyd said. “Once I graduate, I’ll be a step closer to my dreams!”

He likely meant graduating the military academy with his newly honed mental fortitude.

But this was solitary confinement. His neighbor just assumed Lloyd must be a political prisoner who’d attempted to instigate a revolution. Unwavering optimism sort of went with that territory.

“You sure are ambitious. Too dazzling for the likes of this low life.”

The speaker was pretty down on himself, but Lloyd remembered his manners.

“Oh, I’m here from the Azami Military Academy! My name’s Lloyd Belladonna!”

The instant he spoke, there was a strangled gurgle from the cell next door, and not another peep from the occupant.

Lloyd was left puzzled by this abrupt silence, having no clue what prompted it.

I’m sure you’ve guessed who occupied the cell next door— Yep, it was Zalko, huddled under his sheets and shaking like a kid who had seen a ghost.

“H-how...?” he stammered.

Lloyd’s cheery voice echoed through the duct.

“You okay in there? Hello? Well, nice meeting you anyway! I’ll pop over to meet you in person first chance I get!”

Popping by to meet your cellblock neighbor was not something that was called for or even possible ordinarily, and Zalko would have laughed it off—but he was too busy trembling.

“*Him?* Next door?!”

The boy who could fly and weather a storm, the Azami cadet who’d beat the crap out of him and sent him to the slammer—Lloyd Belladonna.

“There’s no way,” Zalko said, trying to force himself back up. “Heh...heh-heh-heh...I must be losing it. I must be hearing things...talking through an air duct, all sorts of weird echoes get in the way.”

There was just no way. This was a prison! The one place he was safe, where he had three meals a day, a bed, and maximum security! He repeated all this to himself, like a form of self-hypnosis—no, more like self-brainwashing.

“This is my guilt talking! Leading a peaceful prison life has made me so guilty I’m suffering from aural hallucinations!”

Little does he know how much suffering he’ll face— “You’re fine! Relax, Zalko, it’s all gonna be okay.”

—Yeah, maybe he sees it coming.

His chat with his neighbor abruptly ended, and Lloyd sat down on the bed,

thinking. With a private room, there was no clamor or anyone to talk to, so his thoughts naturally turned inwards.

He sat on his knees, frowning, eyes closed.

“It’s so quiet... Maybe the ideal place for meditative mental training!”

Lloyd was always at the center of commotion, in jail or out. Perhaps he’d needed a moment for reflection. Shame it came with a criminal record.

His thoughts soon brought a concern to mind.

“You know, it hasn’t been a full week yet...but is Marie doing okay?”

He’d meant to make short work of this errand. He hadn’t been that worried about a two-or three-day absence, but now...he was getting rather fretful.

“I’m sure the others will check on her, but...what if she drinks too much? I hope she’s not going *wild*.”

Marie was not really one for restraint at the best of times...

Getting increasingly worried, Lloyd’s eyes drifted up to the small window above. The sun had just gone down, the starry sky was still purple.

Lloyd removed his shackles the way you would take apart a plastic model, jumped up, and pressed right against the small skylight—which was around the size of your average child.

“Um, aligning those mountains...this is closer to Azami than I thought. I was in that carriage forever, so I thought I was further out.”

He actually was a considerable distance away, but...Lloyd had his own yardstick. A boy who could run the length of the continent in six days saw a couple of mountains as part of an extended backyard.

Just then, he heard a voice outside.

“Roll call, Lloyd Belladonna.”

“Oh, okay! I’m here!”

“Mm, fine.”

With that, the guard started moving away.

“Oh, pardon me!” Lloyd called.

“What?”

“How do you get permission to go out?”

Even through the door you could tell the guard looked appalled.

“Why are you even asking? If you can get out of there, help yourself.”

He meant that as sarcasm—after all, this was a prison—but Lloyd took it literally.

“Oh, we don’t even need permission! He seems busy, so I shouldn’t bug him about opening the door. I know!”

That’s why Lloyd chose to exit through the window. He was being considerate, but it just reinforced the idea that this was a great escape. The birth of a phrase virtually unprecedented: the unwitting jailbreak.

The window had a fitted frame and iron bars, but Lloyd took them right out like he was solving a puzzle. His flight included a laundry list of things the prison architects had never factored into their design documents—easily removing his shackles, clinging to the ceiling, removing the thick-plated glass just by pulling on it, and the very fact that a kid his size had been sent to solitary confinement in the first place.

He placed the window glass neatly in the corner, then wormed his way through the empty aperture.

“Hmph, hah... Okay, now which way was it?”

At this point, allow me to explain the location and layout of Block C.

Solitary confinement was intended to house the most dangerous inmates, their guards, and those who broke the rules after their internment. For that reason, security was tight.

Every door was sturdy, and the guards were decked in the finest gear. Most carried loadouts more expensive than those of your average adventurer.

Worst of all, it was built right above a sheer drop into the valley below. Even if someone did manage to escape the block itself, their only option would be to

cut right across the heart of the prison complex.

Why not use ropes or wind magic to head down into that valley? Try it, and you'll find high-level monsters waiting below. If you were looking for a swift and merciful escape from the world itself, you'd probably still have a better shot streaking across the yard in full view of the guards. According to the architects, the only way you'd get out of this joint would be by learning to fly.

And someone who *could* fly had just climbed out the window.

"If I fly the whole way, I should be back in two, three hours tops. I just have to let Marie know I'll be gone for a while."

If the architect was around, you'd be giving him a sympathetic shoulder pat. "No ordinary design would need to account for flying people. He's an exception!"

Be that as it may, it was time for Lloyd's unwitting jailbreak.

"Aero!"

A Lloyd-exclusive application of an entry-level wind spell. Flight was far beyond simple "application," but the boy himself thought he had barely achieved anything.

With stable flight pose achieved, he set his eyes on the stars, rocking across the night sky. Seen from a distance, few would imagine he was human. Most would assume he was some sort of bird.

Thus, Lloyd escaped the inescapable prison, Hell's Lock, and stopped by Marie's shop like he was running to the corner store.

This effortlessly destroyed all of Rinko's plans to keep his incarceration under wraps...and his escape threw a wrench in the plans of two other victims.

The first—Amidine Oxo and the Rising Blue Dragons.

Same day, same time—by pure chance, they were planning their own escape.

Roll call was over at Block B, and it was almost lights out.

Amidine's crew had bribed a guard and gathered in a cell, ostensibly playing cards, but actually doing a final rundown.

“You’ve got your body double prepared?”

“Prepped and ready. Every man here has a rolled-up pillow dressed in prisoner clothes, with a wig made from unraveled blankets to really sell the package.”

This got a chuckle from everyone as they were all giddy at the prospect of escape.

“What a pack of fools. When they realize this wasn’t poker, but a jailbreak...”

“Save the laughter till we’re out,” Amidine growled.

“Ack, right, sorry.”

Amidine nodded and gave them all a grim look.

“I told the guard I paid off that this game was gonna be all night, but that doesn’t mean we’re in the clear. If we make them the least bit suspicious, we’re done. That’s why we made dummies and wigs, remember?”

Everyone nodded in assent.

“You all know the escape route and patrol patterns by heart, right? You.”

He pointed at one minion like a teacher throwing a student a question.

“Two guards pass by right after lights out. We take the hole dug along the sink drain to the tool room, and once that patrol is clear, we go to the crematorium. We’ve left the grass overgrown by the window there to hide in, so we can make our way through that to the eastern wall. Right?”

“Perfect. There’s a hole in that wall hidden behind the shrubs, and once through that, we’re in the clear. Nothing after that’s a real threat. We’ll get the Rising Blue Dragons going again, and return to the days when we would drink every night with our heads held high.”

Every minion wanted to relive those glory days, and each was nodding enthusiastically.

An hour after lights out, two guards passed, footsteps echoing.

“Time.”

Amidine’s minions pulled the sink away, setting it down gently, avoiding any

noise...

The hole along the drain was just big enough for a grown man to wriggle through. They'd dug this with tools swiped during penal labor.

Amidine also had the handmade rope ladder Zalko had given him.

"Thanks again, Zalko. We dug this tunnel by hand, so no telling when or if the walls will collapse on us. This could really save our necks."

"It'll be brutal if the tunnel collapses on us midway. Nobody wants to be buried alive."

"That *is* the biggest risk in this plan. Let's move."

Amidine took the lead, descending the rope ladder. Rocks jutting out of the walls scraped against them, but they just kept going. Freedom awaited.

Once they were all out of Block B, they moved quickly to the shed. The lock had been left open, so they easily got in through the window.

"The tools for the tunnel, this window...taking our work shifts seriously was mostly sucking up to Urgd, but it had its benefits."

"That warden never imagined you were planning all this behind his back."

They were starting to relax. The hard part was over.

Amidine warned them about it, but he was clearly pretty confident himself.

"Keep your wits about you. Two guards will pass; that's their shift change. We'll go straight to the crematorium, through the grass to the wall, and out the hole."

Everyone nodded again, and Amidine grinned.

"They say Hell's Lock is impossible to break out of...and the Rising Blue Dragon will be the first to prove that wrong."

Sadly, they were already doomed to second place.

But they had no way of knowing that; as planned, once the guards passed, they bolted from the shed to the crematorium, and tried to hide in the overgrown grass.

“We let this section go to seed for this very day! It’ll give us cover all the way to the wall.”

Amidine opened the crematorium window, ready to dive into the grass...and found a problem.

“Huh?”

Not a sound he usually emitted.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Amidine...huh?”

They made the same sound. One minion after another peered out the window.

Somehow, all the grass behind the crematorium had been cleared away. No trash, not even any pebbles were left. It was totally and utterly kempt.

“Wh-what? This is the right window, yeah?”

Amidine checked again, rubbing his eyes. His minions followed suit.

“Y-yeah, definitely. I checked during work hours yesterday! The place was a total thicket!”

It had been so overgrown, it would have taken a team of ten to clear it during a single work shift. All of them were left standing around, at a loss.

Why were the bushes nobody had touched during their work shifts suddenly gone?

I imagine you know who to blame. Shall we do a quick flashback?

After fending off Amidine’s hazing, Lloyd had busied himself cleaning, trying to make up for lost time.

Lloyd’s approach to cleaning came down to the three Qs—quick, quality, and quantity. It was like the latest model R●●mba making a run up to a jump.

He had only a few minutes left after they escaped Amidine, so he was searching for something he could do in that time. He then discovered the strange undergrowth behind the crematorium.

“Huh, this is the only place gone to seed...if we don’t pull this out soon, the roots will run deeper, and cause major problems!”

His mind already on what came after the weeding, he settled on spraying some herbicide, and set about cutting the grass.

He was cutting through the stalks with his bare hands, no tools involved.

In mere moments, the entire patch was clear, and the view opened up.

“Finally you can see the soil. I just need the herbicide now!”

At this point, a guard appeared.

“Mm? What are you doing? Why aren’t you with the others?”

“Oh, right! Sorry! The grass was all overgrown here.”

Lloyd sounded so cheery that the guard just said, “Be careful next time,” and let him off.

End of flashback.

The Rising Blue Dragons had no way of knowing an act of altruism had destroyed their plans, so they began to suspect a rat.

Seeing his minions shift, Amidine snapped, “Stay calm! If the plan was blown, they’d never have let the hole behind the sink stand.”

“R-right, sorry.”

“We didn’t expect anyone to cut the grass, but we’ll just have to go one at a time, and dart across to those bushes. We’ve come this far, we’re gonna make it work.”

The hole behind the bushes was big enough for them to squeeze through. And the growth hid it from view completely. If they could just reach it undetected, they were home free. That calmed everyone down.

“This next section will be demanding, but it’s still doable. As long as no guards call ‘Escape!’ the plan is on. Keep it together!”

Everyone nodded.

“Escaaaaaaape!” Warden Urgd roared in the distance.

Everyone ducked. The timing was too uncanny for even Amidine to avoid flinching.

“A-Amidine?!”

“Wh-what was that?”

Amidine peered out, scared they were surrounded...but the guards were running right past the crematorium, headed toward solitary confinement where it seemed like the escape had taken place. He let out a sigh of relief.

“Might have been Zalko... No, it’s gotta be someone else. Either way, they escaped, and the guards are gathering up front. They’ll be here soon.”

“Then we gotta go back?”

“Dammit, we were so close! What idiot chose today to escape?!”

Swearing under their breaths, they were forced to beat a retreat back the way they’d come.

Let’s turn our eyes to the other sad soul who fell prey to Lloyd’s escape.

“Hmm-hmm!” Warden Urgd was merrily humming.

While Lloyd was flying off to Azami and Amidine’s crew were sneaking out, he was in solitary that night, acting like he owned the joint.

Chomping on a cigar, he was out for a stroll... Well, hardly.

Both arms held sinister implements. They were clearly well-used torture devices.

“Nobody cares if they scream in solitary! It won’t matter how good a grifter you are, Lloyd Belladonna! You’ve met your match.”

His smirk was most sadistic. It seemed like he’d had Lloyd sent to solitary so he could personally work out his issues on the kid.

There was only a small window in the bulky door, making it hard to see through—the perfect place to commit inescapable acts of cruelty.

He read out his mental checklist, like a schoolboy looking forward to a field trip.

“First, we’re using the electrified whip. No, wait, we can’t have him passing out too soon. Maybe this?”

Urgd went back and forth like he was trying to choose a cup ramen flavor. Except with flavors of torture instead.

In no time, he found himself outside the door to Lloyd's cell.

"Ack, look at me. So excited I picked up the pace! Har-har-har!"

With a loathsome smile, he took out his master key and opened the door.

"Forgive me for not knocking, Lloyd Belladonn—hah?!"

But as you already know, Lloyd was currently away. Urgd gaped at the empty room. It took him a long moment to process the truth. His head swiveled around, utterly silent. The smile was still frozen to his face.

"Is he hiding? Flattened against a wall? Balled up in his sheets, sobbing? You con artist!"

Talking like a dad playing hide-and-seek with his kid, he roamed the room, muttering, his smile slowly fading. He left the cell and checked the next one over, making sure he had the right room.

Hell's Lock. The architect had sworn it was impossible to escape. Urgd himself had been sure it was unthinkable. The word "escape" was nowhere in his mind, and he remained convinced Lloyd was simply hiding.

"Grifters these days are notoriously stealthy! He must be...huh?"

He found the window glass and bars resting in the corner. And the iron ball and chain.

Urgd's eyes traveled up to the open window above, feeling the breeze on his cheeks.

He gaped at the rafters for a long time, the rage boiling up within him.

"Escaaaaaaaape!" he roared, his voice echoing through Block C.

He rushed to the guard post, waking up the sleeping guards.

"W-Warden? What's going on?"

"What's going on?! There's been an escape! An escape right here in solitary!"

"Huh? Why were *you* in solitary, Warden?"

It was a normal question for the guard to ask, but the warden didn't answer. Instead, he grabbed the front of his shirt, barking orders.

"Doesn't matter, shithead! There's been an escape! Go find his ass!"

He kicked the guard's butt out the door, and the man ran off down the hall.

"Take roll call! There might be others with him! Blocks A and B! Solitary, and the med ward! Everywhere! Pull out all the bushes till you've dug him up! Especially around Block C!"

Magic stone megaphones echoed alarms and roused the prisoners from their slumber. Rubbing their eyes, they staggered up, confused.

Urgd grabbed a spear and burst out of solitary. He ran around poking tall grass and piles of equipment with it—a vicious way to uncover anyone hiding.

"You can't hide from me! Come out!"

Then he ran to the front gate, spittle spraying from his lips.

"Anything?"

"No, sir! No one's come this way!"

"Then he's still on the grounds...maybe disguised as a guard, trying to slip out in the commotion? Or did he drop into the valley, with no fear of death?"

Urgd had searched all the likely hiding spots and was out of breath—he clearly didn't get much exercise.

"Hahh...hahh... Where is he...? *Gasp!* No...!"

He had a hunch, and he cast the spear aside, running off with his gut wobbling.

He ran to the crematorium. The incinerator had an "Out of Order" sign on it, and he ducked under that, opening the door hidden within.

"He can't have found his way into my paradise...right?"

Paying no attention to the soot getting on him, Urgd forged on down the filthy passage.

At the end of it, he emerged into a room rife with oversized test tubes—a

sinister laboratory.

Several of the tubes were full of culture fluid. Machines floated within, clutching their knees.

As the noise of bubbling fluids echoed, Urgd scanned the lab, his face looking like a demon.

When he was sure it was unoccupied, he looked relieved.

“It’s safe! This place getting discovered would be worse than any escape. I’ll see that brat pays for this, making me panic.”

He did one last check, making sure nothing was missing, then quickly went back the way he’d come, leaving the crematorium, making sure he wasn’t seen.

Once out, he went back to the guard post, checking the reports on the roll call.

The guards were clearly nervous... They normally kept the prisoners in line, but when Urgd was around, they acted as if they were prisoners themselves. He was really a dick all the time. A barrel of unreasonable oppression.

“Go in order. Front gate and watchtower—any issues?”

“None, sir. Ran every guard’s ID. There was no one in disguise.”

“Next, Block A.”

“All prisoners accounted for. Guards, too.”

“Good. Next.”

“Block B, all prisoners and guards accounted for. A few inmates were playing cards after hours and were reprimanded.”

Amidine’s group had made it back in time.

“Hmm. Med ward?”

“No issues with inmate patients. No signs of drug theft.”

“Last, Block C...solitary.”

“No issues in solitary, either.”

“Hmm. Hmmm?”

Urgd had almost passed that up, but his eyes snapped back.

“But that’s where the problem is!” he roared.

“Um, you want there to be a problem?”

“Of course not, you nitwit! It’s solitary!”

The guards didn’t get how that followed, and they were all just staring at each other.

Urgd paid that no heed, foaming at the mouth, spit flying everywhere, kicking things around. The guards were gradually becoming actively hostile.

“Right, Warden, you were the one who first discovered the escape. Who escaped?”

“Lloyd Belladonna, right out of solitary! I confirmed it with my own eyes! I know it for a fact!”

You know how there is a type of person who gets all mad about stuff they never actually explained? Urgd was exactly that kind of bad boss—which made the guards even more dubious.

Urgd bellowed, “This way!” and led them all to Lloyd’s cell.

He jammed the master key into the lock, kicked open the cell door, and they all peered in.

“See, you fools? It’s as empty as—”

“Mm? What’s up?”

Behold! Lloyd had, in fact, made it back in time for roll call.

A very uncomfortable silence ran through Urgd’s subordinates. Like a boss who couldn’t find important paperwork, and got the whole office worked up into a frantic search for it, to then eventually find them...in his own briefcase.

“N-no, this can’t be true! The skylight...!”

“What about it?”

Everyone looked up. But the skylight was firmly shut with bars across it. Lloyd had repaired it properly. He knew how to close what he opened.

“There doesn’t seem to be a problem with it.”

“Th-that makes no sense! This can’t be real!”

Urgd was waffling between being awkward and angry, and the result made it look like he really had to pee.

“Uh...so what’s going on?” Lloyd asked.

“Oh...our mistake. Sorry, we’ll be going now,” Astax said, bowing. As the senior guard, he took the lead, and closed the door to Lloyd’s cell.

Having no clue that his escape had caused pandemonium, Lloyd was just utterly baffled. Not only was he unaware he’d escaped an inescapable prison, he wasn’t even aware he was in jail in the first place.

The click of the key turning echoed through solitary.

A long, uncomfortable silence. Unable to bear the looks in the guards’ eyes, Urgd started spluttering.

“D-don’t look at me like that! He wasn’t there! I’m not lying! The window was straight up gone!”

He sounded like a kid insisting they’d seen a ghost for real, with the exact level of desperation.

But the guards felt like they’d been torn from their slumber and sent into a panic over a fake escape, and were pretty ticked off about it.

This was aided and abetted by frustration with the warden’s regular behavior.

“Warden,” Astax said, speaking for them all. “You aren’t one of the guards assigned to patrol solitary, so why were you even here this late?”

“Urgh...”

Urgd’s face twisted. That was a sore spot. He couldn’t exactly say he had come to personally torture the kid out of sheer spite.

“I’d heard rumors, but surely...”

“Corporal punishment?”

“Or is this a pederasty thing? Yikes.”

The guards really didn't want to believe he was dishing out extrajudicial justice, but given his regular tyranny—they looked at him with scornful eyes.

“N-no! I'm not lusting after any boys! That ain't it!”

If you deny it like that, it sounds like an admission of guilt no matter what the truth was. Several guards backed away.

“Regardless of your sexual proclivities, we really can't have you treating this prison like your own personal playground any more than you already are.”

“Y-you dare talk to me like that?!”

But Astax's grim look never wavered.

“Prisoners are human beings,” he said. “Enacting personal vendettas upon them is immoral. This incident will be included in the next prison management report, and you'll be lucky if you get off with a scolding.”

“Hnggg...”

Half their conclusions were wrong, and this was all getting reported to their sponsors—Urgd's stomach was in knots.

Rage, panic—and he was blaming Lloyd for all of it.

“That little shit really got me good... He knew I was coming for him, pried the window out, and hid himself somewhere. I'll make you pay, Lloyd Belladonna! And turn you into a mechanical weapon!”

However baseless Urgd's grudge...it did not take long before he was ready to kill.

The third day of Lloyd's unwitting prison life.

Lloyd awoke in his cell, and with nothing better to do, made his bed and started doing stretches.

The iron ball and chain were making a racket, and he gave them a puzzled frown.

“Hmm, does this accessory really help with fatigue? It seems like it would just chip the floor, and make work harder. I wonder if it's meant to do something else?”

It never occurred to him it might be a shackle. The fact that he felt it interfered with his movements at all suggested it was technically serving its purpose, but it's unlikely the world's shackle manufacturers would agree.

"Is it something like a really cold body pillow? But then why is it on my foot? Oh! Maybe it's like a friendship bracelet thing? If the chain breaks, my wish is granted? Darn, I shouldn't have taken it off yesterday."

That would be a particularly spiteful friendship bracelet. The wish would never come true!

But as Lloyd pondered this, the door opened, and Astax came in.

"Lloyd Belladonna."

"Oh, yes! Good morning!"

Lloyd was very big on greetings. Guards weren't used to polite prisoners, but Astax soon got to the point.

"You're out. Back to Block A."

He'd only just been moved here, so this came as a surprise to Lloyd.

"Huh? But I just got here? Was this like...a trial session?"

Conflating solitary with VIP treatment, Lloyd could only conclude as much.

Astax seemed unsure what he meant by that, but elected not to get sidetracked.

"Seems there was a mistake on our end."

"Oh, yeah?"

That made sense, so Lloyd followed him out of the cell.

On the way, he asked, "Um, the warden said this was a tailored program, but what was tailored about it?"

"Best you don't know."

Convinced Urgd had sent Lloyd to solitary to have his way with him, Astax evaded specifics.

Thus, Lloyd was sent back to Block A, with those convicted of comparatively

minor crimes. The rest of the inmates were shocked to see him again.

“L-Lloyd!”

“Back from solitary already?”

“What magic did you use?”

“That’s amazing!”

People were already showing him respect. His rapid return, none the worse for wear, convinced everyone they were seeing a legend in the flesh.

Minox looked especially relieved.

“L-Lloyd! Was everything okay?”

“Oh, yes. Seems it was just a clerical error... Didn’t really get to enjoy the VIP package much.”

Lloyd’s term for solitary just impressed everyone. “Attaboy, Lloyd!” someone said, to thunderous applause.

“You didn’t ‘enjoy’ it? That sure is something.”

Lloyd was unsure what impressed them, or why they were clapping, but he went ahead and raised a hand, acknowledging it, like a little prince before the admiring crowds.

Seeing Lloyd’s confused look, Minox moved to settle things down.

“Okay, everyone, Lloyd’s looking lost—best we leave it at that.”

“What are you, his manservant?”

“Well, I was a local lord’s secretary, so not far off the mark. But that’s irrelevant! We’ve got to head to the mess hall before they start yelling at us.”

“Oh, right! Let’s get moving!”

With Lloyd at the center, the throng filed toward the cafeteria. Looking like the director of a major hospital making the rounds, Lloyd was clearly at the pinnacle of the prison population.

And two figures were staring fixedly at him.

“Can that really be...?”

“Hard to believe.”

Lloyd piled breakfast on his tray, and these figures moved to sit next to him.

“Mind if we join you?” one said, with a pleasant smile.

“Oh! Merthophan!”

The man had short silver hair and glinty eyes. He was a former Colonel of the Azami army, but was now an agricultural adviser. Merthophan Dextro.

“Mwa-ha-ha! Not just him!”

The next man swiftly tore off his prison garb, flaunting glutes like hardboiled eggs and thighs that glistened like chicken wings. A regular macho man hailing from the martial arts paradise known as the Ascorbic Domain. Tiger Nexamic.

“Friends of yours, Lloyd? Very...unique.”

“They’re new arrivals, came in this morning.”

The inmates around Lloyd braced for a fight.

“Can you vouch for them, Lloyd?” Minox asked.

“Oh, yes! This is Merthophan from the Azami a—”

Merthophan quickly interrupted him mid-sentence. “I’m a sinner captivated by agriculture, Merthophan the farmer. And this—”

“Mwa-ha-ha! My only crime is having these muscles! Tiger Nexamic, owner of the cutest butt around!”

He whipped off his uniform again, flaunting his body.

Leaning in behind him, Merthophan whispered, “Sorry, Lloyd, keep my military ties a secret. It could cause issues.”

“Oh, okay. But why are you both here? What a coincidence!”

“That’s what we want to know, young Lloyd!” Nexamic said, wilting. “You make it a regular practice of exceeding my wildest expectations! Once more, you leave me beyond impressed! My patented hamstrings are all aquiver!”

That sounded like a very different emotion.

There were guards trying to yell at Nexamic for taking off his uniform, but it

kept going on and off so fast that they never quite got the chance. Like boxing referees who couldn't quite manage to yell "Break."

"This is the Tiger ☆ Castoff! AKA the *Iai* Strip! Clothes off too fast for the eye to follow, muscles flaunted! Clothes donned again at equal speeds! So extreme! Makes the beholder imagine themselves seeing things, a variation on the subliminal effect! A new technique I've developed that sears the sight of my muscles into your mind far more effectively than ordinary undressing!"

So a new way to annoy people.

"Um, who are you talking to?"

"Bwa-ha-ha, on stripping alone I believe I have you beat, Lloyd!"

A weird thing to be competitive about.

The arrival of an Ascorbian celebrity confused several inmates.

"The chief of the Fist clan? Tiger Nexamic? Why would he get arrested?"

In just a second, Nexamic was in front of the prisoners, flashing his biceps.

"You wish to know, fellow convict? My sins lie entirely with my cute bubble buttocks! I object to that sentencing tremendously!"

Oh, indecent exposure, every prisoner present assumed.

Merthophan stepped in to supplement.

"I found myself wearing only a loincloth on the border—while Nexamic was in his underpants. For reasons beyond my understanding, that led to our arrest."

No one understood what he meant, nor why he admitted to this in such a grave tone.

"But why are you here?" Merthophan asked, turning to Lloyd. "Chief Alka didn't say a word about your presence."

Lloyd looked confused. "But you both know what this place is?"

"Um, yeah?"

"We do...?"

Both seemed loath to admit it.

Lloyd beamed. “You both wish to control your urge to get undressed, so you’ve joined this mental-fortitude training camp! Are you perhaps responding to ads for the self-improvement classes?”

““Huh? Mental...what?””

Their eyes went wide. They called time-out, ran off to the corner, and huddled.

“Can we assume Lloyd is unaware he’s in jail?”

“Merthophan, my brother. This is how it always is. Lloyd’s misunderstandings are inevitably as cute as my glutes.”

“Then best we don’t tell him about Chief Alka’s orders to investigate this prison.”

That was why they were both here. They’d assumed Lloyd shared the same motivation, but his presence seemed unrelated—which was confusing in and of itself.

“We’ll leave him be for now...and focus on our own job.”

“And tell her about this the next time we report.”

While they whispered, the cellblock was astir. The famous Nexamic, his brother figure Merthophan, and their best friend Lloyd. This was only accelerating their worship of the boy.

“He’s tight with Ascorbic Domain leadership?”

“And his honorary brother!”

“If we become close with Lloyd, our lives are made!”

It couldn’t hurt to butter him up. They were starting to see Lloyd as some sort of big-shot fixer.

All this was being watched, from a distance—

By Amidine. Who actually *was* a big-shot fixer. The man had hidden in the shadows, making Rokujou dance in the palm of his hand.

“Tiger Nexamic. And if my information is correct, the other man is from the Azami army.”

A famous Ascorbian, and the Azami army's former hawk.

For them to be jailed together... Amidine smelled a rat.

"They should be like water and oil. It makes no sense for them to be here—and shouldn't the other one be the older brother? That bodybuilder is clearly over forty."

He had no way of guessing they'd bonded over a shared love of fieldwork and physical perfection.

His men also looked at them suspiciously.

"Amidine, this has gotta mean..."

"Yeah, they're likely here to investigate the prison. Which means Lloyd is after the same thing. Rokujou sent Lloyd, Azami sent the colonel, and the Domain sent this Nexamic. Urgd must be involved with something real bad, and I don't wanna be a part of it."

"Amidine, what if we helped them out, and make it so they owe us? Might reduce our sent—ow!" a minion suggested.

Amidine had rapped him on the head.

"Reducing a life sentence? We'll still be stuck here at least ten years. Escape's our only option, no use dreaming."

"But after yesterday—even if we didn't get caught, it'll be hard to try again."

The disaster the day before had forced them to close up their own escape route.

"The guards will likely have changed their patrols after that... The grass won't grow back anytime soon... We're gonna need Zalko's help."

Amidine made up his mind to take another run at the thief.

Meanwhile, Zalko had been escorted to the medical ward early that morning.

Prisoners in solitary were rarely given any consideration. Zalko was a particularly infamous one, and the guards all knew he'd escape if you gave him a chance. He was moved by five guards in a circle around him.

On guard against the slightest suspicious action, all five watched his every

move...like they were trying to work out a magician's trick.

But this only lasted a few minutes.

Talking to Lloyd had made Zalko flash back to the worst day of his life, and he had spent the night quivering in fear, unable to sleep a wink. He could barely keep his eyes open, and he'd visibly lost weight—overnight, which was alarming on its own.

At first, the guards had been cautious, worried this was an act, but his fingers were cold, and he could barely walk— They grew certain he was genuinely ill. Now they were more concerned that it was contagious.

“Is this gonna be a thing? He was fine yesterday. This big a change overnight isn't natural.”

“He insists it's all psychological. We're gonna have to take his word for it.”

“All that time he claimed he was comfortable here... I don't get how thieves think.”

Outside solitary, they soon reached the medical ward. This one was built with a bit more warmth than the rest of the blocks. It had bigger windows that actually let light in in an attempt to make things brighter for prisoners with mental health issues.

The interior smelled of disinfectant, like a proper hospital. The biggest difference was that the rooms all had iron bars on them, and the doors were heavily locked. It was like the second stage of a zombie-fighting game. The kind of place that made you run back and forth to open a lock only for a bug-eyed thing to pop out at you.

They reached the examination room, and one guard started making small talk.

“Did you hear, new doctors came in?”

“Today? That's sudden.”

The others frowned, but didn't think too hard on it.

“This place operates on its own rules, and dealing with prisoners burns 'em out quick. They hire a lot because they never know when they'll up and quit. What are they like?”

“They’re real pretty. The nurses are all cuties, too.”

“Seriously? All girls?”

Suspicious gave way to delight.

They were all fired up like boys who’d learned the new transfer student was a hottie.

“And that means we have to be on the lookout to make sure these low-lives don’t get any funny ideas.”

“Sounds like the start of a classic love story.”

They were just having a casual conversation, but Zalko’s eyes started to look extra hollow.

“Lady doctors, nurses, I don’t care,” he muttered. “Just pump me full of meds so I can stop seeing visions of Lloyd Belladonna, then get me back in my cell.”

Little did he know the hand of destiny was about to bring him another fateful encounter.

“Next!”

“Oh, sure!”

The door swung open with a creak. Seated within— “What brings you here?”

“I must use this stethoscope to hear Sir Lloyd’s heartbeat!”

“.....I can see the appeal.”

“Quit acting like some quack doc on the East Side.”

Marie was wearing a white lab coat over a pencil skirt suit. Selen, Phyllo, and Riho were all in nurse uniforms. Marie had her legs crossed, and she was toying with a pair of glasses, very lady doctor-esque—with her experience selling medicines, she fit right in. If she had been asked to pose as a janitor, her cover would have been blown instantly. She wouldn’t have known the first thing there.

The only real issue was Selen, who had somehow acquired a sexy nurse outfit instead.

“Oh-ho-ho! I can’t wait to get back and take Lloyd’s temperature!” she purred.

She seemed in high spirits, like she was receiving special treatment.

But seeing this particular lineup of women sent Zalko’s mind back once more to that fated day.

How Selen had resented a fortune and threw a crystal ball straight at his head.

How Phyllo had flung Nexamic aside, leading to an accidental butt-stomp.

How he’d taken Marie hostage and had the daylights beaten out of him.

How Riho had driven a train into his body.

It wasn’t just Lloyd— All of these tragedies were spinning before his eyes— and he snapped.

“Aiiiiiiiiieee!”

It wasn’t really conducive to a medical examination. He jumped up like a frightened kitten, then buried his head beneath a bed.

Screaming on sight. Completely baffling girls and guards alike.

“Huh? What? Why?”

Everyone looked at each other, then the guards shrugged.

“Seems like this inmate’s mind is gone. We were hoping some meds would help...”

“.....I’ve seen him before,” Phyllo muttered.

Selen picked up the fallen chair. “You have? He went under the bed so fast I couldn’t tell. I hardly think it matters. Best we leave him be,” she said.

“Sure, takes all types.” Riho sighed, watching his legs thrash. “I wouldn’t wanna be a doctor no matter how well I got paid.”

Marie was basically a doctor, so she grimaced. “I know the feeling. There were some tough nuts to crack back home.”

“Well, I ain’t exactly got the education for it. So? What do we do here?”

The guards had grabbed Zalko's feet and were trying to pull him out from underneath the bed. He was shaking like a frightened child, huddled up.

No one knew what to do.

Some prisoners waiting outside popped their heads in to see.

"What's going on? Need a field hand?"

"Mwa-ha-ha! I heard a scream like a boy seeing a ghost!"

It was Merthophan and Nexamic.

And the sight of them dug up still more traumatic flashbacks.

The silver farmer, clad in a loincloth, wielding sickle and hoe.

And the macho man whose muscular posterior had delivered such a humiliating booty press to the face.

With the new development, Zalko received double the trauma. His brain couldn't keep up anymore.

"——?!——?!——?!?!"

His screams were past vocalizations. He was breathing like he had seen a specter during the toughest stretch of a marathon. This confused both new arrivals.

"*Hngg*? Breathing troubles? Is it time for Tiger CPR?!"

One new arrival carried right on with his shtick.



Zalko was clutching a guard's chest like a frightened child.

"Is this really a psychological thing?"

"He was normal yesterday... Gotta take his word for it."

Marie thought it seemed a lot worse than that, but she handed over a three-day supply of a tranquilizer and told him to come back if he needed anything else, then sent him on his way.

Once Zalko and the guards were gone, Riho let out a sigh.

"Exhausting! What was *his* problem? But worse than that..."

The new arrivals quickly put the screaming thief out of her mind.

"Merthophan, and Tiger Nexamic."

"We heard someone else was here, but Mom merely said it would be a nice surprise."

It was certainly a surprise. Rinko had the soul of a true entertainer. Marie shook her head.

"Princess Maria and the academy cadets. To encounter you here..."

"Mwa-ha-ha! This series of surprising encounters is numbing my hamstrings!"

".....You haven't changed."

Phyllo gave him an icy glare, and he gave an intense one back.

"Always so reserved, Phyllo Quinone! You are the warrior who bested me!"

"Yeah, yeah, besides that, why are *you* here? You weren't jailed for indecent exposure, were you?"

"Good instincts, Riho Flavin."

"Shit, is that really why?"

She gaped at him.

"No, that would have led to questioning," Merthophan said grimly. "Chief Alka asked us to investigate this prison, so we chose to make it lasting."

"Getting questioned by the cops at all is already not kosher!" Riho said.

It sounded like this was a regular occurrence, too.

“If the goal was to select a team whose default behavior makes their arrest believable, she succeeded.”

Everyone eyed Selen, the proverbial pot. But this rolled off her like water on a duck’s back.

“Ho-ho! To hear you tell it, you know all the evils transpiring here, from the head down to the buttocks!”

“..... Don’t need that last part.”

“It is your *posterior*! Mwa-ha-ha! Tiger ☆ Pun!”

Nexamic had silenced the room—he tended to have a chilling effect like that—so Marie took charge.

“We need to locate the manual or facilities that prove the malfeasance occurring within these prison walls, and in doing so, free Lloyd.”

“We were told the gizmos used in the last battle are being produced here via inhumane methods. Chief Alka ordered us here—also to find that manual.”

“But I don’t appreciate the indecent exposure charge,” Nexamic grumbled. “I merely flaunted my muscles on the border for three days and three nights! Arresting someone for that is a bit much. Right, Brother Merthophan?”

“Sending someone to the clink for going to a café in a loincloth is absurd. Odds are they’re deliberately bringing in excess prisoners on the flimsiest excuses to fuel their evil schemes.”

They seemed convinced of this, but their lack of moral compasses merely appalled the girls.

“They’re gonna get arrested for *reals*,” Riho said, looking genuinely concerned.

“We thought we might find clues to these human experiments in the doctor’s office, so we pretended to have hemorrhoids!”

“Of all the claims you could have made.”

“Mwa-ha-ha! The ultimate fake medical condition! A common occurrence in

the industry, Belt Princess! They don't go away quick, and you can cover your skullduggery by insisting you were in the loo! Unlike viral infections, there's no fever or coughing! You can look as healthy as you like, and no one wants to see the affected area!"

Merthophan was nodding agreeably.

"A side benefit is the sheer number of silent sufferers. The guards took us at our word and brought us here immediately. As long as you know the ins and outs, you can sell the lie— These are the benefits of hemorrhoids!"

A passionate speech about a touchy subject, and Riho was getting pretty desperate to get the discussion back on track.

"We just got here today, so we haven't really investigated much. Still, the area around this room looks pretty clean. It's an open layout, and there's lots of people going in and out; not really the best place for the clandestine."

With all the sunlight streaming in, proper ventilation, and plenty of outside visitors coming and leaving—it wasn't exactly where you'd want to hide anything.

Merthophan hummed in agreement.

"If not here, we'll just have to search every nook and cranny of the prison itself. Oh, and about Lloyd..."

"Sir Lloyd? Where?! Where is he?!"

Selen was all over him instantly, and Nexamic chuckled.

"Mwa-ha-ha! We figured his presence here was unrelated to our mission!"

".....It's his usual mystery logic."

"Thought so. Otherwise, Chief Alka would have mentioned it. 'Record Lloyd's prison uniform on this crystal before leveling the facilities to the ground.'"

"I can see that..."

Merthophan and Marie exchanged looks. Lloyd's misunderstandings and Alka's berserk rampages were just accepted facts now.

Marie crossed her legs, and gave a rundown of their plans.

“We’re checking patient records, especially those who passed away. If their bodies are fueling these machines, there must be traces left. Those might lead us to the lab itself.”

“And the manual is likely within? We’ll poke around strange deaths and mystery facilities from our side.”

Merthophan’s plans were set, but Selen was still off in a world of her own.

“And with the case solved and Sir Lloyd saved, he’ll thank me by playing doctor! Adult edition!”

“Mwa-ha-ha, prison doesn’t change you! Impressive, Selen! Tiger ☆ Respect!”

“I have my doubts about your love of stripping, Tiger, but I do respect your dedication.”

Two freaks, alike in deviance. Phyllo rarely showed her emotions, but even she was frowning at their exchange.

“There’s lots we can check up on as prisoners. Fortunately, Lloyd has insured that the bulk of the inmates are cooperative; we can easily ask around.”

“Lloyd’s magnetism works everywhere.”

“The fact that we rolled in to save him disguised as doctors and nurses just proves we’re caught up in it ourselves,” Riho said.

Marie was nodding. “We’ll work this from the guard side. You go with the inmates, Merthophan.”

“I’ll report back,” he said.

They were given an ointment, and headed back to their cells.

Meanwhile, beneath the Hell’s Lock crematorium, in the machine lab....

If you’ve seen a *sentai* show, this is totally the place where they manufacture the monster of the week.

The lab’s very existence was a secret, a remodeled storage space—only Warden Urgd and the prison’s sponsor knew it was here.

And that secrecy meant it was not kept especially clean. There was dust and

spider webs everywhere, and light fixtures left as is after the magic stones ran out. If you invited a girl here, she'd turn around at the front door.

Documents were left out, browning in the light, and ink stains covered the tabletops.

Warden Urgd was at this desk, writing. At the top of the page was 'Official Apology' in rather slapdash handwriting. Clearly, he was annoyed that he had to go through the formality at all.

His handwriting wasn't the only evidence of his disgruntlement.

"Not even my fault... He wasn't there! Dammit..."

Attitude wasn't enough; he had to put it into words. Unquestionably, this was the kind of guy who never got over anything bad that happened to him.

Why was he writing this down here, instead of his clean office? Because of the woman across from him.

"Don't be so crabby! It's just a formality. If you can't even do that, your subordinates will turn on you!"

She was in a goofy rabbit costume, but was actually the King of Profen, and the root of all evil—Eve. Her real name was Eva, and she'd been president of an emerging world power back in the real world. A real powerhouse.

Rinko was right—she was using this prison to make cyborgs. Most of the actual work had been done by Dr. Eug, and she'd merely supervised.

"L-Lady Eve..."

"Just call me Sponsor here! If you get used to saying secrets aloud, it gets easier to slip up later."

Her tone remained cheery, but her manner clearly meant business; Urgd was obedient in a way that his usual behavior made hard to imagine possible.

"S-sorry, Sponsor!"

"Hmph," she said, huffing inside her costume. "Stop grumbling and get this written. Your sadistic streak is responsible for this mess, so you have only yourself to blame. And this scrap of paper will regain the trust of the guards, so

it's hardly a high price to pay."

Eve tapped the half-written document. It didn't matter what it said, as long as he showed some sort of remorse. Once he'd gotten enough ink on the page, she filed it away, not even bothering to read it.

"A little bird told me you tried to punish a sassy inmate? But then you couldn't find him in his cell, and assumed he must have escaped."

"Y-yeah..." he admitted, reluctantly. He never let anyone else's failings go unpunished, but he didn't want to admit to his own.

"So it's true..."

"B-but he really wasn't there! He must have—"

Eve quickly silenced his excuses.

"What prisoner comes right back after a successful jailbreak?"

This logic was irrefutable, and Urgd grimaced—unaware the prisoner involved didn't know he was incarcerated.

"He'd likely just hidden well, trying to fool the guards. Pure spite, nothing more. And it's left you writing this apology."

"That little turd... I knew it!"

Urgd was on his feet, his fists shaking. Eve waved him down, yelling, "Stay!"

He settled back down in his chair, like a scolded dog.

"Hands on your knees—good, good. There's really no saving anyone who stays stupid after dying."

Warden Urgd had been a former death row inmate in a different prison. He'd successfully corralled that inmate population under his control through strength and fear alone.

He knew how criminals thought and was hell-bent against going back to jail. That left him at Eve's beck and call. She excelled at manipulating people, and he was easily manipulated to begin with.

"Sponsor, can we do a test run on the new and improved gizmos? The mechanical guards?!"

Eve pointedly didn't answer right away, making him sweat.

"Hmm, should we, though? Maybe I'll allow it if you promise me you won't do anything careless."

"Of course! I swear!"

Always one step at a time. Making permission a bait, keeping him on her hook.

"But no torture! That's a bad habit you have. We only need them dead."

"So I can use the machines to kill him? Woo!"

Urgd, rejoicing like a kid.

"Just this once! A little reward for all your hard work being warden. These things can easily ruin one's trust, so make sure you do things properly."

"Thank you so much!"

Urgd bowed. If he had been a dog, his tongue would have been out. If he had a tail, it would have swished like a windshield wiper on a rainy day.

Watching him wander off all motivated, Eve sighed, sounding suddenly tired.

"He's easy to manipulate, but not exactly talented. I'm in the final phase—Eugy is gone, and there's so much to do that even his ilk is an asset. I'd have cut him loose otherwise."

Eve did not mince her words.

"Once the last dungeon's open, I'll slip back to the real world while everyone else is in a panic. I'll trap the former researchers-turned-demon lords in this world along with Alky and Lab Chief Rien. Rune technology and the secret of immortality will be mine, and mine alone. Guh-hah-hah!"

She cackled, then folded her arms.

"But honestly, doing this alone is rough. Science isn't my real job; the prep takes time. And delegating the modifications to prisoners requires manuals, which is an inherent risk... Perhaps I blew the timing on cutting Eugy loose. Shame!"

However, she didn't really sound that remorseful. Perhaps that was a sign of

confidence? Eva was so certain she could make her plan a success.

“As long as Lab Chief Rien and Alky don’t get in my way... If I could have killed Lloyd, that would have been ideal, but little chance of that now. The only one I can really recruit is Vritra—Director Ishikura.”

Suddenly, she reeled like she’d been hit with a dizzy spell. She sat down heavily.

“Whoops...forgot I mustn’t say his name. Oof, I can’t wait to get back to my world.”

Showing no signs of stress, her cheery laugh echoed through the empty lab.

Meanwhile, Marie was scowling at the medical records in the doctor’s office.

Hell’s Lock’s medical ward kept records of every guard and prisoner visit, accidents on duty, and the cause of death. All of this information was readily available.

Medical histories (and chronic issues) were particularly vital to have on hand if anyone collapsed, as well as for tracking attempts to gain medicine illicitly and hawk it for personal gain. This was hardly uncommon here.

In other words, doctors had as much access to a prisoner’s personal information as the guards did. There was a high risk of Marie getting caught, but it was also a prime place to investigate.

Still, between the prisoners, guards, and past death records, it was a lot of data to get through, and she was left sifting through mountains of paperwork.

For that reason, Marie wasn’t the only one working. Selen, Riho, and even Phyllo were all looking for anything suspicious.

“We meant to take it one piece at a time— I didn’t think they’d bring the whole stack.” Riho winced.

Marie wore the same expression.

“The guards may not have much experience with women. I just mentioned wanting to see it, and they all started volunteering— Before I knew it, the whole archive was here.”

“No one can resist the jailhouse Madonna.”

“.....Prison princess.”

Selen made a face. She was normally the type to pursue, so it was novel to be pursued herself.

“This is all personal information. Are we allowed to have it here for long?”

“.....Why not? It’s not going nowhere.”

Seeing Selen starting to absently flip through the pages, Marie scolded her.

“Now, now, no chit-chat. If that shelf stays empty, someone might start to wonder; best we get through it quick. We need to prepare medicine and perform our regular duties, too.”

“Yeah, yeah, we’re on it, Marie. Just...nothing’s caught my eye. Other than this—that thief who messed up the school festival’s here. Zalko.”

The man who’d just screamed at the sight of you all.

“I found Minox’s file! Allan’s father’s secretary.”

“.....That takes me back.”

“He’s been incarcerated here since the incident at Reiyokaku. Looks like he doesn’t have much time left to serve.”

“Huh...well, there weren’t major casualties, and he was a victim himself, so there must have been some clemency.”

They were talking like they’d found a yearbook during spring cleaning.

“.....I’ve got Amidine,” Phyllo said. “Life sentence...serves him right.”

“He deserves it. He was trying to steal a kingdom!”

“.....The notes say he’s one of Warden Urgd’s pets. Suspicious.”

“Perhaps he knows something. Let’s have Ex-Colonel Merthophan and Nexamic make contact.”

Riho found Lloyd next, and got worked up.

“Oh, I’ve got Lloyd’s file! Gaston Tien’s name, crossed out and corrected. So slapdash.”

“Let me see... Wow, you’re right. Burglary and indecent exposure? I can’t believe he didn’t notice the problem here.”

“I’d rather the exposure be for *my* eyes only.”

“.....Is the pink nurse’s brain also dyed in lovey-dovey pink?”

Marie ignored Selen’s all-too-typical behavior, and began scanning the list of the dead.

“What I’m seeing doesn’t seem all that unnatural. Which is itself kind of unnatural. Fights, illness, accidents, like they’re on a rotation—That bothers me.”

“There were a lot of transport carriages going off the path...where prisoners died, and guards came back alive.”

“Unless they have families, no one really asks about inmates, but guards are another story.”

The list made it seem like they had a quota to kill, and were dutifully fulfilling it.

“Suspicious, but not definitive proof. Definitely smells like something’s going on here, though. If we can just locate where this facility is hidden, and find the manual within...”

For a change of pace, Riho switched to the guard’s medical records, and quickly spotted something surprising.

“Hmm. I just flicked through the guard’s case files, but...look here.”

She handed over Urgd’s file.

“The warden’s health evaluation? Nothing seems wrong with him, looks healthy enough.”

Riho shook her head, pointing at one spot.

“No, there’s one strange note. It’s just crossed out, sloppily corrected.”

“A weak heartbeat? A wheezy sound heard through the stethoscope?”

“And it’s quite odd that there are no records prior to this. Everyone else has academic histories and birthplaces listed.”

The odd correction, and the obscured history—Marie deemed that dubious.

“Let’s take a closer look at Warden Urgd. Hopefully we can find some help from the guards.”

The warden was clearly hiding things. And they’d need help to find out what.

“Todayyy is the last dayyy Lloyd llllives.”

Relaxing in his office, Warden Urgd was humming a song of his own composition. Two guards of unnatural stature stood behind him, silently obedient.

These must be the mechanical guards he’d spoken of. He couldn’t wait to use them to bend Lloyd to his will.

Humming, he adjusted their collars, like a kid playing with dolls. These were weapons that could easily kill an ordinary human—a bit much to call a toy.

Once he’d enjoyed that, he called for Astax, and ordered him to bring Lloyd in.

“Is this really an apology?”

Given what had transpired, Astax seemed suspicious, but Urgd stuck to the lie.

“Of course! I’ve got these guards with me to ensure I do nothing wrong.”

“I don’t recognize them.”

They had their hats pulled low over their faces, and when Astax tried to lean in, Urgd stopped him.

“They’re new! Do you not trust me? Bring the kid around.” He pushed Astax away, a note of anger in his tone. “Come back when you’ve got Lloyd with you!”

Astax fled. And not long after, Lloyd came in, looking perplexed.

“I brought him,” Astax said, concerned. “Can I really trust you with this?”

“Shut up and trust me!” Urgd snapped, brooking no arguments.

Astax frowned, but was forced to retreat.

With no one to stop him, Urgd smiled at Lloyd—backed by his machines. It was the kind of smile you’d use while saying things like “Welcome to hell.”

“Um, what’s this about?”

Lloyd had no clue why the warden would want to see him, and was puzzled by the man’s array of expressions, as well as the unmoving guards behind him.

Urgd had excuses ready.

“Oh, I just called to say sorry about the accident the other day.”

“Oh, that!” Lloyd said, straightening up. Having witnessed it firsthand, he had a piece to say. “I don’t think I’m the one you should be apologizing to. Even the supervisors were taken aback! We’re lucky it didn’t turn out far worse, but I hear these incidents have been all too common.”

Lloyd expressed concern for the guards as well, and glanced at the guards behind Urgd.

But he soon realized that something was off about them and looked closer.

“Huh? They’re—”

Urgd was salivating like a wild beast that’s spotted a steak.

“Yes, I’m ever so sorry! So sorry, I thought these mechanical guards could clean up the mess.”

Responding to his voice, red lights gleamed, and they lurched to life. Blades popped out of their hands, and the machines attacked Lloyd.

“Huh? What?”

Lloyd was quite rattled by this. And— *Shnk*.

The mechanical guards’ blades struck home.

Urgd took a deep, satisfied breath.

“Ahhh, yes. It’s a true pity I was unable to handle things at the time and had to resort to this. You may have suffered a little, but your body will be used to—hmm?”

He had a triumphant smile, but Lloyd had stopped the blade with his bare hands.

Twisting the mechanical arm, Lloyd shot Urgd a suspicious look.

“Is this some sort of dummy? Like the ones from the military exercise? I know all about these.”

“Huh? Dummy?”

The mechanical weapons had been a critical part of Jiou’s invading force. Rinko had told Lloyd they were dummies made for the military exercise, and so he’d happily destroyed hundreds of them.

Blissfully unaware of this, Urgd was simply baffled. But Lloyd’s lack of injuries definitely had him sweating.

“How are you okay? Why aren’t you bleeding?!”

He simply couldn’t process the idea of stopping a blade bare-handed.

Lloyd was glaring at him.

“I understand the worry of human error and relying on machines instead, but you’ve got to make proper use of them! I mean, look, they’ve mistaken me for something else! Did you sign a contract with an unscrupulous manufacturer?”

It seemed like Lloyd had deemed Urgd an incompetent manager. Not only had he decided to forego training and bring in machines, but he had purchased faulty equipment.

“Human eyes must always make the final checks! And you can never cut corners on personnel training. I know I’m one to talk, but you’re getting paid for this, so you’ve got to do your part! Your décor and shoes are all coming out of your clients’ wallets, and you should be conscious of that!”

Layer after layer of erroneous conclusions, plus invincible flesh no mere blade could cut—Lloyd only *looked* like a sweet young boy. Urgd could do nothing but gape.

“Okay!”

Lloyd twisted the mechanical guards’ arms and slammed them onto the office floor.

Dust flew. Necks bent awry. A shiver ran down Urgd’s spine.

But Lloyd let him off with a scolding.

“I’ll ignore the fact that they attacked me, but you’d better take responsibility for this! Make sure the manufacturers recall these things!”

The whole time, he was simply talking from the standpoint of a customer. With that, Lloyd stormed out of the warden’s office in a huff.

Urgd’s life had flashed before his eyes, and he was left feeling stunned. He felt equally confused and relieved.

“I-I’m alive? Who *is* that kid?”

He was strong enough to take on two mechanical dolls at once. He wasn’t a grifter but clearly something much worse. Beads of cold sweat ran down the warden’s face.

“It feels like facing Lady Eve... Who is he?!”

Then he blinked, confused by his own words.

“Mm? I’m scared of Lady Eve? When did I think that?”

He searched his memories.

“A strange rabbit costume suddenly showed up in my old prison... Then she...”

His memories felt hazy.

But then the mechanical guards, which Lloyd had toppled, lurched back to their feet.

“Uh...uh-oh! Th-this ain’t good...”

What if the sensors in their heads had broken, and they couldn’t tell friend from foe?

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than they attacked Urgd, moving like a pair of zombies.

“Tch! They don’t know it’s me! Lloyd Belladonna knew they’d do this, that’s why he let me live! I’ve gotta stop them! Hey! Shit—”

He frantically tried to flip the switch, but they were out of control and their blades dug into their own master.

“Aughhhh! Urk...”

Blood oozed from the wound, and his guts spattered across the office floor... or so he thought. Even with the blade in his belly, nothing happened.

Something was clearly wrong. Blood didn't flow out—only a mystery fluid.

The moment he realized this was the same antifreeze and oil blend used in the weapons, Urgd's memories of his first meeting with Eve came flooding back to him.

The laboratory beneath the crematorium.

He'd been hung. He should have died. But instead, he saw a row of his fellow death row inmates— And watched as they were sliced to pieces.

The next thing he saw was a rabbit costume. When his eyes met hers, she yelled, "Oh my god!" A total overreaction.

"His eyes met mine, Eugy!"

She was talking to a girl with shark teeth, who cackled.

"We got a winner, Eve! It happens. Those who keep their minds!"

"Oh? So he's better than how he actually looks?"

"Nah, it doesn't mean much. But with a little work you can get a higher-spec machine out of him."

"A promising newbie! Oh, don't let me stop you. Do go on."

"Hey-oh."

His memories ended.

"Oh, yeah."

Urgd ripped the mechanical guards' heads off.

"I'm just like them...a machine. The only dead prisoner who kept his mind..."

A grotesque biopart wriggled out from the cut on his belly. He pushed it back inside, and stood up like nothing had happened.

"I'm a chosen being. I ain't no model, Lloyd Belladonna."

He kicked the broken guards aside, boasting to himself.

He was the same as the models, the toys, that he looked down upon. You'd think this would have come as a blow to him, but he seemed fine.

"Works for me. Gives me a chance for a good power-up. I've got a decent grasp on the alteration tech, construction, and logic... I can rebuild myself stronger than that goofy rabbit lady."

Urgd had been in charge of the dead prisoners in Eug's absence, working alongside Eve.

He'd had to fumble through the steps, and follow the manual...at first. But it was simple work, and after doing it repetitively, he'd started working out what the numbers meant, and what the process accomplished.

This had originally just been a sickeningly sadistic impulse to take more pleasure in his work, but just as the boy outside the temple gates learned the sutras by heart, he now knew what to fiddle with to make a stronger cyborg.

"I'll show you... Just you wait...Lloyd Belladonna...and Eve!"

Then for some time, Urgd disappeared. The next time Lloyd would see him, he would be thoroughly remodeled—but that was still a while off.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was huffing on his way back to Block A.

"Mm? Lloyd Belladonna, you've returned."

Veteran guard Astax had been waiting to escort him, and looked relieved to see him safe.

But after seeing how furious the boy was, he suspected the warden *had* tried something.

"You look rather angry. What did he do?"

Astax still had concerns about the warden's propensity for pederasty, but Lloyd simply told the truth.

"Is the warden short on staff?"

"*Hngg?* Well, that's a constant issue, sure."

"He apologized for the accident, but his solution to prevent further incidents involved these weird mechanical dolls."

“Dolls? I did see some new employees standing behind him...”

If those had been dolls, that was some crazy technology, Astax thought. Lloyd wasn't done yet, though.

“He's clearly been sold some defective products. They came at me with knives!”

“They did?! Knives?!”

Astax was now thoroughly lost. Lloyd was calmly reporting the facts, which confused him further.

“They must have thought I was something else— They were probably repurposed dolls originally designed for military exercises. If you put something that dangerous in charge of site supervision, it'll just lead to *more* accidents!”

“W-wait... Let me sort this out...”

Holding up a hand to stop the storm of new information, Astax rubbed his temples, groaning.

“He called you in, then weird dolls attacked you, right?”

“Basically, yes.”

The only reasonable explanation would be that Urgd had tried to kill Lloyd with those machines. So this kid *was* here to investigate something, and was quietly trying to let him know that? Astax decided to test those waters.

“The man in charge sports rather valuable jewels... What do you make of a prison like that?”

“He must have a high salary! Mm? Wait, is this a prison?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

Neither expected that reaction.

“Um, I thought I was here for a mental-fortitude training camp. I'm eager to improve myself!”

The inmates here were largely eager to improve their lots in life, so they

wound up committing crimes against the state.

Surprised, Lloyd kept asking questions.

“I-is the lead lecturer an unscrupulous entrepreneur? A prison disguised as a training camp—that would explain several inconsistencies! What a crafty trap!”

Astax’s mouth was flapping wordlessly. The two concepts *did* have some overlap, but there was definitely nothing crafty going on here.

“You’ve lost me from the get-go there.”

“Is that Urgd guy the ringleader? Okay, he’s definitely lining his own pockets. That’s why he has jewels and expensive shoes! He sure had Gaston fooled.”

Lloyd was vaulting from conclusion to conclusion, and Astax was starting to wonder just who the hell this kid was—in every meaning of the phrase.

At this point, the actual investigators, Merthophan and Nexamic, approached them.

They were checking the prison for signs of anything fishy on the inmate side. Nexamic had patted his abs and said, “Flaunting my beautiful physique will make the prisoners open up to us like they’ve got their drink on! I’ve got the six-pack right here! Bwa-ha-ha!” but in fact they’d made little progress and were rather dispirited.

Then, they saw Lloyd and a veteran guard together— From how the other guards acted, Astax was clearly far more beloved than the warden.

Merthophan was curious about the odd pairing and their conversation.

“What’s going on, Lloyd? Guard?”

“Mwa-ha-ha! We’re happy to pitch in!”

Lloyd looked shocked.

“Guard? So you knew this was a prison all along?!”

“W-well, yeah?”

Striped uniforms, rooms with iron bars... This question seemed to come rather late.

Lloyd's questions kept coming. "Did you know the proprietor is an unscrupulous entrepreneur?"

"A what now?"

Lloyd was dropping mystery terms that confused everyone, and they both turned to Astax in hopes of a comprehensible explanation.

"Is...he referring to Warden Urgd?"

"I-I think so. See..."

Perhaps Astax had simply been waiting for a chance to talk. He glanced around once, making sure no one else was listening in, and then began briefing the two men.

"—That's all I'm aware of."

Why was he telling prisoners this? Even he wasn't sure. And he admitted to it.

"It's not really something to discuss with inmates...but the three of you don't exactly seem like the typical criminal."

Nexamic turned his macho smile to Lloyd.

"Especially him!"

"Mm, yes."

The strangest thing was that he had only just realized he was in jail. His very being was an enigma in itself. And the series of inexplicable incidents that had occurred around him.

First and foremost in Astax's mind was the hope that this kid was here to investigate—otherwise, it would all be *too much*.

Merthophan decided they could trust Astax.

"Right you are," he said. "We've been sent by the Azami Kingdom to investigate misdeeds lurking in the shadows of this prison."

"Oh, good! Then he's one of you, yes? The muscly one is only stripping like that to make the indecent exposure charge seem more believable! It all makes sense now."

Astax looked relieved, but Merthophan shook his head apologetically.

“No, Lloyd may not be here for that.”

“What?”

“And Nexamic has never been one for staying clothed.”

“Pardon?”

Merthophan scratched his cheek, also unsure how to explain. Both were simply acting as came naturally to them, and that defied mere words.

“Mwa-ha-ha, it’s a long story.”

Nexamic would have happily regaled him at length, but perhaps this wasn’t the place.

“We are rather exposed here,” Astax said. “Let’s find a better place to talk.”

With a responsible guard on their side, Merthophan suggested they rendezvous with the girls.

“Then how about the medical office? The new doctor is also with us.”



“There’s more...*gasp*, you mean Marie? Azami’s secret savior?”

At this point, no force on earth could convince Lloyd that Marie was actually the princess, and Merthophan found that actually rather impressive.

“I wondered why they suddenly sent in a bunch of women,” Astax said, scratching his head. “If Azami’s that involved, this must be serious.”

“Yes, odds are high it’s downright inhumane.”

“Whew, and here I was hoping to coast to retirement. Tell me...”

“What?”

“If he’s not an investigator, what *is* he?”

Merthophan managed a smile.

“He *is* on our side. He’s your...unexpected hero.”

No other descriptors applied. If this were an SRPG, he’d be one of those OP guest characters you can’t actually issue orders to.

At this point Minoxix approached the group, looking worried.

“Did it go okay, Lloyd? Everyone’s worried about what the warden wanted.”

“Did you know, Minoxix?” Lloyd asked. “That this is a prison?”

“Y-yes...I was aware...”

That question, the veteran guard, Lloyd’s outlandish acquaintances... Minoxix put two and two together. Lloyd was one thing, but the other two must be here to investigate Urgd’s activities.

A number of suspicious actions floated across his mind. But his sentence was almost up. If the warden turned on him now... Should he really risk that?

He hesitated a long moment, wiped the sweat from his brow, and said, “Well, I’m glad you’re safe.” With that, Minoxix hurried off.

Nexamic found that suspicious.

“Brother Merthophan, that man just now...”

“Mm, former secretary to the estate of a former student—Allan. A victim of

Jiou's many schemes, he wound up playing host to a Treant. Like Micon, he retains those powers to this day."

Alka had provided them with *some* prior intel.

"Looks like he knows things."

"But he is about to get out soon and would rather keep his nose clean. I get that."

If they could recruit him, great—but they could hardly insist. They left Minox to his own devices, and headed for the medical ward.

There, the girls were investigating between rounds of their cover jobs...but not really achieving much.

"*Hngg*, there's nothing here. It's all fishy, but there's nothing conclusive."

"This happened with Lieutenant General Casitas and Hydra, too. The Jiou Empire...and behind them, the Kingdom of Profen. They're good at keeping their tail hidden."

Marie was almost impressed.

At this point, Phyllo came back in.

"There you are! How'd it go?"

Phyllo just shook her head ruefully.

".....I tried to ask about the warden...but they were trying to make dinner arrangements."

They must have mistaken her investigation for interest. She'd gone in search of testimonies but had been pestered instead, and looked quite annoyed.

"Sounds rough."

".....I almost punched a few of them."

But violence would never do. For Lloyd's sake, Phyllo didn't ball her hands into fists.

"I'm about ready to punch this paperwork. I at least want a lead on where this facility's hidden!"

It wasn't just Phyllo. The whole crew was on edge now.

"Not what I hoped for. I figured a doctor could easily find the manual and bring Lloyd back home."

".....I'd rather not work here for long."

"Indeed! I am wearing this nurse outfit for Lloyd, not them! Eyes off it!"

"There are more people coming by for a peek than actual patients. I could never be a doctor."

Word of the new beauties had spread, and there were more distractions. The guards should have put a stop to this, but they were also eager for a chance to visit.

The sour silence was broken by a knock at the door.

"Yes, yes, if you're just here to gawk, move along. Take a painkiller and scram."

Selen was well past faking it.

But this group wasn't here to gawk. It was Merthophan, Nexamic, the guard Astax, and Lloyd himself.

"Er, oh...sorry, were you busy?" Lloyd asked.

Selen's eyes were instantly replaced with hearts, and she dove into his bosom.

"Sir Llooooooyd! Forget I said a word! *Hurp!*"

Phyllo had grabbed her ankle and slammed her down onto the floor.

".....I body-slammed a fool again today."

"We oughtta tranquilize *her*. But here's an odd lineup."

As if to emphasize the word "odd," Nexamic started posing, his muscles threatening to rip apart his uniform.

"I see things aren't going well, Selen Hemein."

"Mwa-ha-ha! We are no gawkers! But feel free to admire my posterior!"

"We found a collaborator."

Merthophan gestured to Astax, who bowed.

“I’m Astax, a guard here,” he said. Not quite up to speed, he asked, “Can you fill me in on what you believe Warden Urgd is up to?”

“Uh, that’s the thing...”

Marie took the lead and explained everything, even the biocomponents. Nearly all she had to say was outlandish and deranged—the moment she mentioned human experimentation, the guard’s stomach started tying itself in knots.

Normally, he would have laughed it off—but what he *did* know about this prison matched up just enough that he found himself convinced.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was incensed.

“That’s awful! Disguising themselves as a self-improvement camp, taking people’s money, then sending them to a prison to be transmogrified!”

He clearly hadn’t got past the “unscrupulous entrepreneur” part of his theory.

“In other words, Astax, we’re looking for evidence that would justify a full-fledged investigation. If we knew where the bodies are processed, the Azami army could swoop in.”

But Astax responded with a sorrowful look.

“I’m afraid I don’t know. Urgd is a very secretive man, and prone to retribution, so none of us dared to pry.”

“Does he believe he’s the king of the prison?” Selen fumed. “The more I hear, the worse he gets.”

Riho shot her a look as if to say, “You’re one to talk.”

Phyllo stepped forward.

“.....Guards might not know, but prisoners would. I heard Amidine was aggressively courting the warden’s favor.”

“Ah, so perhaps some inmates were involved in the experiments.”

“.....Highly possible. That man is *scum*.”

Phyllo had been forcibly separated from her parents because of him, and naturally deemed him a prime suspect.

But Nexamic stressed his bulges, adding what he'd learned.

"Mwa-ha-ha! And Amidine frequently visits solitary!"

"Solitary? What for?" Lloyd asked.

"Hngg," Nexamic said. "I would understand it if someone there had an alluring build, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

Few would sympathize with this perspective, but there was one who did.

"Well, naturally. If Sir Lloyd were there, I'd go myself!"

Selen. Freaks tend to think alike.

Astax ignored them both, offering a more relevant suggestion.

"I heard stories he was bribing guards to meet with Zalko. Perhaps the two of them are plotting something together?"

"Zalko the Thief? They...get along?" Riho asked. "Knowing them both, I'm surprised they'd hit it off..."

"It seems they did," the guard agreed. "I've heard they often played chess with a handmade set. But it was likely more than that."

".....Were they both helping Urgd?Amidine, you villain!"

Phyllo started cracking her knuckles, but Marie put a stop to that.

"Too soon to say, Phyllo. Sounds like Amidine screwed up recently, so he might actually be planning to escape before Urgd eliminates him."

Phyllo scowled, like that was an even worse outcome..

".....We can't let him. If he's working with Urgd, I'll break his legs. If he tries to escape...I'll do the same. If he squeals..... Look, those legs are getting broken no matter what."

"Mwa-ha-ha! I sense the weight of history here, but let not your enmity weigh upon the snap of your fists. We must not let our larger purpose slip away, Phyllo Quinone!"

It was easy to forget, but Nexamic was a master martial artist—and Phyllo quickly simmered down.

“.....Right you are. Thanks, Nexamic.”

With that resolved, Astax said, “He usually meets with Zalko during the afternoon free time.”

“Perfect. Let’s swing by solitary. We can say we’re following up on Zalko’s visit from this morning. Do you mind, guard?”

“I can arrange it. If Zalko’s panic was a pretense to assist his plan, we must put a stop to it.”

But he really had just been freaking out about his traumatic past.

“Merthophan, Nexamic, you keep looking for information on the inmates’ side.”

“Will do. Take care,” Merthophan intoned.

“Um,” Lloyd said. “I’m happy to help in any way I can! Let’s get Urgd and these other unscrupulous entrepreneurs!”

This caused the last shred of lingering frustration to vanish, and all the girls smiled.

“We have seen the light!” Selen cried. “Until afternoon comes, we’ll handle patient visits, and check the rest of the paperwork.”

“““Mm-hmm.”””

Improved prospects made everyone feel better; Merthophan chalked that all up to the Lloyd effect.

Oblivious to all of this, Amidine was headed to solitary once more. He had not imagined he would ever be back. A painful reminder of his failed escape.

“Again? You never learn.”

Normally, he would have bribed the guard with a knowing smile, but today, Amidine just looked grim.

“What, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed? I heard you were playing cards all night. Major losses?”

His failed escape sure counted. He smiled like a man placing an even bigger bet on the next race in the hopes of recovering those losses.

“Huge, but this next one’ll sort it all out.”

“Yeah? You know the drill, keep it quick.”

“.....I’ll try,” he whispered.

Then he tried to perk himself up.

“I’ve asked Zalko again and again, and he never agrees. But I’ve got no choice. No telling what Urgd’ll do. We need his help.”

He’d just have to make him agree. Ready to argue for hours, he stepped up to Zalko’s cell, and found...

“Escape? Gladly!”

A man transformed, desperate to leave.

“Uh...”

Amidine reeled back, bowled over. Things going his way so abruptly was actually rather alarming.

“Y-yo, why the sudden change? You were fine with it before.”

Zalko didn’t bother explaining. “Amidine! This place was no sanctuary! It’s hell! Literally! Like I’m trapped within!”

“Yeah, you are... It’s a prison.”

He found himself playing the straight man here. Zalko was acting downright odd.

“Tell me what brought this on, or I can’t afford to be pleased.”

“I wasn’t imagining it! The devil is here! The chestnut-haired demon! Lloyd Belladonnnnnnnnaauughhhh!”

Lloyd was rapidly advancing to the same level as “he who must not be named.” And that connected several dots for Amidine, who gave him a look of deep sympathy.

“It all adds up. The real bad customer you ran up against was Lloyd?”

“You know him?!”

“Hell yeah, I do. He’s the one who ruined my plans. Who knew he’d clapped the irons on you, too.”

A surprising point in common.

“Heh...heh-heh-heh...he got us both. That’s why you wanted out? You should have said so.”

“Well, he only just got h—”

“If you’d told me earlier, I’d have done anything to get out! I can’t be here! You said you’ll guarantee my safety once we’re free, right? I trust you!”

Zalko was still beside himself, but Amidine decided that was fine as long as he was helping.

“So the sooner we leave, the better. Can it be done?”

“Honestly, escapes are best performed solo. But if that chestnut demon’s involved, it’s another story. If we’re caught, we can always scatter, and sacrifice the others! In which case numbers—”

Amidine was shaking his head.

“Sorry, I can’t afford to sacrifice my men.”

Zalko looked put out.

“That’s not like you, Amidine. You seem like you’d easily offer one up.”

“I already tried that once, and it didn’t help me much against Lloyd. The men I’ve got are those that stuck by me. Without them, I’m an emperor without clothes.”

“I don’t get it. I was always a lone wolf. But if the job’s to get you all out, I’ll do my best. Just make it worth my while.”

Just as these two villains were plotting their escape...

There was a knock on the steel door. Ordinarily, the guards would just yell through the bars—knocking wasn’t how things worked in solitary. They exchanged glances.

“What do you think?”

“That ain’t a guard.”

A cheery girl’s voice echoed.

“Selen, are knocks necessary?”

“I just assumed manners apply anywhere. My good upbringing shows again!”

“.....Can’t believe Selen *has* manners.”

“After all the times she’s been caught peeping... Let’s just go in.”

Both men recognized those voices and started to panic.

“I-isn’t that Sardin’s kid?”

“From the military festival?”

They were pressed up against each other in fear, like they were huddled against the elements on a frigid mountain peak.

Then a veteran guard led the girls in.

“Coming in, Zalko. Amidine’s with...huh?”

They found the two men in each other’s embrace.

Riho got the wrong idea and blushed. “Huh? Whoa!”

Selen and Marie rolled with it.

“Oh, were we interrupting?”

“So that explains the frequent visits!”

But Phyllo’s unwavering enmity remained unabated.

“.....Do anything unpleasant and I’ll rip it off.”

There’s her vicious streak.

“Aiiiiieeee!”

The sources of his trauma invaded en masse, and Zalko was left screaming. Of all the times they could have arrived.

But his panic helped Amidine calm down.

“Yo, Zalko!” he said. “Screaming like that is just gonna drive home the misunderstanding! This isn’t what you think it is, I swear! Nothing of the sort!”

Astax just gave him a look.

“Then what *were* you doing?”

“.....”

An obvious question that one would ask in this situation, but it was hard to answer. He couldn’t exactly admit he was planning to escape—and he shouldn’t have been here at all.

And that just sold the “friends with benefits” theory.

“I did not imagine that love could bloom here. So much for our theory!”

“But this suggests they’re not connected to Urgd.”

“Oh, go on, do continue. As a love evangelist, I would never dream of stopping you.”

“.....If he’s useless to us.....we should crush him.”

Between the brutal language and the unwarranted conclusions, Amidine was now yelling.

“Why are you even here?! Just to drop insults? Can’t you see you’ve made him cry?!”

Zalko was so far gone, he was shaking like a newborn fawn.

“Why are you in solitary, Amidine Oxo of Block B?” Astax growled.

“.....” Amidine didn’t have a good answer to *that*.

“Zalko came in for treatment this morning, and we’re here to follow up on that,” Marie said. “Officially, at least. But we’re also here to speak to you, thespian.”

“That sounds ominous,” he said, scratching his head.

“So we’re gonna get straight to the point,” Astax said. “Are you involved in what Warden Urgd is doing here? If so, tell us everything.”

Things were finally adding up, and Amidine regained his composure.

“Oh, I get it. You thought I was with him?”

“.....If you hide anything, I’ll kill you.”

Phyllo snapped a finger, firing a warning wind blade.

“Golly, Rokujou royalty sure are violent.”

Amidine had dealt with his fair share of threats, and handled it well...

“Aiiiiiiiieeeee! I’m sorry! I’ve had enough! No more man butt!”

Zalko was down on his knees, in your classic submission pose—or maybe a step beyond that into some sort of *yoga*. If there’d been a mat under him, this would have looked like a stretch for sure.

“Phyllo, what did you even do to Zalko? He’s a bit too scared...and ‘man butt’?”

“.....I have no memories of doing anything..... I swear.”

Phyllo had simply accidentally sent Nexamic flying, and Zalko had just happened to wind up beneath his glutes.

“But the way he’s shaking..... Good thing we *didn’t* bring Lloyd.”

“Yeah, we can’t exactly have him dying of shock,” Marie said. “So...”

She asked again.

“We’re here to find evidence that Urgd has been performing immoral experiments on prisoners. We could *force* you to talk...”

Marie’s threat was cut off by Amidine’s shocked gasp.

“Experiments?! That’s even worse than I thought!”

“You weren’t aware?” Selen asked.

He was beyond shocked and answered without thinking.

“Yeah, I knew he had a bit too much dough, and that prisoners were regularly being transferred out somewhere, but I just thought it was your standard human trafficking. This is way worse.”

“So he didn’t tell you anything?” Astax asked.

Amidine shot him a sardonic smile. “Aren’t you the warden’s most trusted guard? You’re the first person who oughtta have noticed if anything was wrong. I dunno why you think I would.”

“.....”

Astax became quiet.

Amidine went ahead and spilled his escape plans.

“I knew enough to plot an escape. The warden’s the type to eliminate anyone who’s not useful to him anymore, and I value my life.”

He was trying to blame the warden and get off the hook for his own escape attempt.

“Yes, this was my sanctuary! Until Lloyd Belladonna came... Now it’s not safe here! I’m not letting him pulverize me again! Jailbreak is self-defense! We have a right to escape!”

A bold legal argument, Zalko.

But this meant the girls’ lead had gone up in smoke.

“Well, shit,” Riho said. “I thought for sure he’d have dirt on the warden, but now we’re back to square one.”

“At this rate we’ll be investigating *forever*, more prisoners will fall victim to him, and Lloyd will never come home.”

“.....Never trust a middle-aged man.”

“My age is hardly relevant?!”

But as the others bickered, Marie had an idea.

“Escape...escape! That’s it!”

“Wh-what’s what, Marie?”

“I’ve got it! I’ve found a Plan B!”

““““Plan B?!””””

The girls were astonished, but Marie was extremely confident. She turned to Astax.

“Warden Urgd is notoriously careful—at this rate, he’ll sense the wind blowing his way, and set about destroying evidence. If we don’t stop him and his sponsor, there’ll only be *more* victims.”

“Yes, our priority must be stopping Urgd,” Selen agreed.

“But we’ve found no definitive proof, and have yet to locate the scene of the crimes. The risk remains too great for Azami to send in a full team.”

“The border guards are neutral, and this is their prison— If you force the issue and come up empty, they’ll use it against you diplomatically. Is that the gist of it?”

“And as long as Azami can’t budge, this sponsor can do whatever they want.”

Here, Marie’s smile grew sinister.

“But there’s one way to get Azami and Rokujou involved.”

“Really? That would have to be something very serious,” Astax said.

But Marie was all fired up about stopping Eve’s evil plans and bringing Lloyd home, so she was ready to propose something pretty crazy.

“For instance—if *every* prisoner held here were to escape. What would happen then?”

A proposal so bold it made not only Astax and Amidine but her own friends go silent, too.

“From Amidine to Zalko, from traitors to thieves, the scum of the earth—all slipped from your grasp. Every country in the world would demand an investigation. And all responsibility would fall on Urgd’s shoulders.”

Astax was starting to blow bubbles.

“A-a mass jailbreak...?!”

Marie turned toward Zalko.

“You can make it happen, right? You’re the world’s most famous thief! This task is trivial, considering *your* skills!”

“I can! I will! Just spare me!”

At this point, he'd pretty much do anything.

Astax looked rather horrified that a mass jailbreak could be that easy.

"Not to toot our own horn, but Hell's Lock is surrounded by deep valleys, high walls, and precipitous slopes. This is not a place anyone can easily escape from. Especially in numbers..."

Zalko responded like a true professional.

"It might be a long shot, but if you time it right..."

"As a guard, I'm interested."

Just a moment ago, Zalko had been a quivering mess—suddenly, he was an expert. The harder the task ahead of him, the more invested he got.

"Paving the roads. The one work shift that lets them outside these walls."

"In broad daylight, right under the noses of the watchful guards? In territory where monsters will attack if you take one step off the path?"

Zalko grinned. "No one would expect it, right? If we can exploit that mindset, we've got a chance."

"Urgh..."

"The key to a mass escape is to make them think this might *not* be an escape—and buy time. I hear you've got an unnatural rate of rockslide incidents...so most guards will respond to an accident first, and escape second."

Zalko cackled, and Amidine looked impressed.

"You *earned* your reputation," he said.

"And if we've got a few guards backing our plan, even better. If we can spin things so the jailbreak happened spontaneously as a result of the accident, then responsibility lies less with the guards on the scene than with the way Warden Urgd did nothing about the warning signs of worksite safety issues. That's good for everyone."

Those terms would certainly benefit the prison staff— The veteran guard couldn't argue.

"I like it!" Marie said, snapping her fingers. "Let's make it happen! Lloyd's got

Block A under wraps. Block B?”

She looked at Amidine. An instant later, Phyllo had her hand held to his throat like a knife.

“.....Help, or I’ll slice you open.”

“I know I don’t have a right to refuse! Put that thing away!”

Phyllo backed down, and he rubbed his neck. He began to negotiate.

“Are we free once we’re out?”

“No, we’ll have you moved to another prison. But we will be reducing sentences in return for cooperation.”

Phyllo looked more disappointed than Amidine.

“.....Fine, I guess.....but if you do run, you die.”

“Don’t answer for me! But I guess I’ve gotta live with those conditions.”

Some escape this was, he thought, scratching his throat.

“The next road shift is the day after tomorrow... Not much time, but can we pull it off?”

“No use dragging it out. I’ve got the plan worked out—just do your part, guard.”

“Never helped inmates escape before...but I’ll do my best.”

And like that, the great escape was a go.

Little did they know that Urgd was biding his time, waiting for a chance to attack.

Chapter 3

Running Refugees: A Mass Breakout Staged Like an Evacuation Drill

Plans for the great escape were progressing smoothly.

They began by having Lloyd corral the inmates.

“Warden Urgd is in cahoots with an unscrupulous entrepreneur! He’s going to turn us all into cyborgs!”

There was a lot of unhinged lingo, and normally he’d have been laughed off, but he had already gained everyone’s trust.

“Good lord!”

“I knew that bastard was up to no good.”

“I didn’t sign up for a biological transmogrification!”

Like so, they all were immediately on board with the jailbreak. Block B went just as well; before the day was over, everyone knew the plan. There were a few prisoners who still didn’t trust Lloyd and looked reluctant, but one glare from Amidine took care of them.

Next came the guards. The majority were shocked when Astax proposed they look the other way on a mass exodus...but given Urgd’s record—the constant flow of prisoners in and out, the strange number of accidents, and more than anything else, his arrogance and general untrustworthiness—all the guards backed Astax instead.

“Okay, thank you. Really.”

More guards than he’d planned on agreed to help, and that brought a tear to his eye— Best nobody tell him that most of the extras were just trying to suck up to Marie and the nurses.

Now they had a guard-approved escape plan devised by the great thief Zalko, and even the most reluctant prisoners realized this was a wave worth riding. Before they knew it, a solid eighty percent of the prison population was involved.

And the day of the fated escape arrived.

With a hubbub and a hustle.

Yet, look—not a single soul was stressing out. They'd gathered in the mess hall for breakfast like always—and the sheer lack of tension loosened lips.

It was like the cafeteria the day before a school trip. "What'll you do when you get out?" "Tend the fields back home, I guess? Wanna join me?"

The guards would have chided this sort of chatter, but today, they turned a deaf ear. Some were even bidding favored inmates farewell! It was chaos unbound.

A guard-approved escape plan—what bigger farce could there be? No wonder the vibe was more like they were prepping an evacuation drill.

There were plenty of guards concerned about letting criminals roam free, however temporary. But...well, listen to how the inmates and Lloyd were talking: "So Azami will be helping those here on false charges or minor transgressions, but major crimes..."

"Oh, that'd be me. I embezzled a whole lot."

"I'm afraid you'll be sent to a different penitentiary. Good luck serving your time!"

"Aye-aye! I'll be a model prisoner, so as not to sully your name, Lloyd!"

It all went like that—they trusted Lloyd, and took him at his word. The guards were pretty sure none of them would use the chaos to make a run for it.

Amidine was doing much the same work in Block B. They didn't plan on having the violent prisoners in solitary (or anyone sick enough to be in the med ward) participate as they believed it wouldn't be an issue if they weren't involved.

Intentionally allowing an escape—so that Warden Urgd's crimes could be

punished.

A rare instance of water and oil working together under a charismatic leader against a mutual enemy.

After breakfast ended, it was time for the pre-escape meeting. They had a whiteboard set up with *Tips for a Successful Escape by Zalko* written across the top. A sight that had the guards cringing.

“Okay, listen up,” Merthophan said, clapping his hands. The cafeteria fell silent. Lloyd, Amidine, Zalko, Merthophan and Nexamic stood by the board—along with Astax, representing the guards.

Merthophan was taking point, running down the final plan checklist.

“Okay, everyone—you know what today is?”

“““Escape daaay!””””

They were like a group of grade school kids on their way home.

And Nexamic was their P.E. teacher.

“Exactly! A Muscle ☆ Escape to ensure this Urgd fellow is duly punished for the misdeeds he’s committed within the remote confines of this border prison! And I—am Tiger ☆ Nexamic!”

Nobody knew what muscles had to do with it, but his posing earned him a cheer.

“Muscle penal labor!” “You’re so cut! Cut like steel!” “Your abs look like a cell door!”

This was just a bodybuilding contest now, and even the guards were starting to chime in. The mood was definitely hype for just about anything.

When the volume fell a bit, Zalko stepped up. Straightening his back, he raised a hand—and a stir ran round the room. He was the only prisoner here dangerous enough to have been placed in solitary confinement—even the guards were nervous—but he paid that no attention, and gave a rundown on the escape route and things to be wary of.

“This escape depends—well, if you follow Amidine’s instructions, it should be

fine. No pushing, no running, keep chatter to a minimum.”

Definitely just an evacuation drill. He used the board to make sure everyone knew the monster-free route out.

“Anyway, the guards are on board with the plan, so...it’s not much harder than taking a walk. We’re all in this together, so no fighting or trying to make off on your own.”

He stepped back, and Astax took his place. He seemed somewhat rattled by talking like this in front of the inmates, but he took a deep breath, and steeled his nerves.

“Oh, Astax!”

“The next warden!”

He smiled weakly at the catcalls and started talking.

“I certainly never imagined I’d be letting a prison break happen, but remember—this isn’t mandatory. You’ll be assisting the prison staff in handling failings on our side—and Urgd’s. There’s no telling what might go wrong, so if you’d rather stay put, no one will argue with you.”

At that, the outgoing prisoner threw his arms around Minox’s shoulders.

“Ain’t no one talking like that! Right, pops?”

“N-no...”

Minox was hardly enthusiastic, but it was hard to admit he’d much rather finish serving what little of his sentence he had left.

Astax cleared his throat, and continued.

“The rest is like Zalko said. Follow Lloyd and Amidine down the planned route, and board the wagons waiting at the end of it. Please don’t do anything weird.”

His one last plea, which got a round of shouts from the crowd.

“Don’t be silly!” “We ain’t gonna rub dirt on Lloyd’s face!” “Hell no!”

Lloyd’s true believers left Astax without a leg to stand on.

“Then make it so. That’s all from me.”

If they'd fallen for that boy's spell, they likely wouldn't break the law no matter how hard up for cash they got. He felt like the whole punishment thing was no longer really needed.

"Lloyd, anything to add?" Merthophan asked.

"Um," Lloyd said, nervously stepping forward. "I haven't been here long, but... you may be rough around the edges, but I'm sure most of you are fundamentally good people."

That silenced the crowd. Not the kind that followed a bad joke...but one of reverence, of everyone listening intently.

"Some of you really have committed serious crimes. You may not have wanted to, your worst impulses may have gotten the better of you, and it may have felt like your only option—everyone had a different reason."

He looked around the room with a serious expression.

"I don't mean to sound dismissive, but look at me. Even I can make progress toward my dream if I try hard enough! I may not be there yet, and sometimes I get discouraged, but I know that if I just keep moving forward, it'll work out somehow. There's always another chance!"

Merthophan watched him with a smile. The boy had achieved a lot, but he still considered himself "not there yet." He couldn't wait to see what Lloyd would become in the future.

"Today, we're all coming together to ensure that this Urgd villain gets his just deserts. I'm sure you'll all learn something from the experience. I ask only that you do your part! Thank you."

Silence.

And then—a scattering of applause, that turned into a deafening thunder. Minox, Amidine, and even Zalko joined in.

"Our part...?" Minox whispered, looking sorrowful. But his words were drowned out by the roar.

And the hour of the escape shift arrived. The plan was to fake an accident during road work that would make the prisoners turn and run. Then they would

board Azami military wagons, flee to other prisons, and escape Urgd's clutches.

Being inmates, very few had any possessions of note; they were marching in lines, carrying the tools of their job. No ropes or shackles— Ordinarily unthinkable, a sight that made them look more like extras in a movie. Or like students gathered in the yard for a pep rally.

The girls were watching from the medical ward.

"Looks like nearly all of them are following Lloyd's lead."

"The same thing happened at the hotel. Are we sure he ain't literally magnetic?" Riho asked.

The boy himself remained oblivious to this power.

"He is Sir Lloyd!" Selen was boasting like usual, as if it was *her* accomplishment.

"So far so good."

".....But Urgd has yet to show himself. It's worrying."

"Yes, he's a conspirator in the mass production of machine weapons. No telling when he might show up with an army of them."

Riho turned toward Block A.

"I hear there are a few prisoners voluntarily staying behind. We might have to step in and save them."

"Oh? Why would they do that?"

".....Those with not much time left in their sentences didn't want to risk it."

"Smart. A little longer, and they can leave with their heads held high."

None of them realized Minox was among those few people.

Meanwhile, the prisoners were approaching the worksite. Stretching their tendons before the run, taking deep breaths to steady their nerves, they said their last good-byes before the escape began... Oh, there's one with his middle finger up; clearly he didn't enjoy his time here.

Lloyd's voice echoed through an amp stone like a tour guide.

“Okay, everyone! Get in line!”

The prisoners rushed to assemble. They snapped into formation and awaited further orders.

“Like cadets who just joined the academy,” Merthophan said. “Wonder if they’re still like that...”

Lloyd laughed— The cadets around him were certainly way more relaxed about that stuff now. Riho, for instance, had invented a way to hide her eyes beneath her bangs and sleep standing at attention.

Preferring to avoid that topic, Lloyd began to give final instructions.

“Last review! The story is that during our shift, the scaffolding collapsed—just like last time.”

He pointed at a pile of already collapsed scaffolding with all the energy of a TV chef pulling the fully cooked dish out of the oven.

Lloyd turned to the guards.

“The collapse sends the guards into a state of panic. Are you ready?!”

“Ready!”

They were pretty into this themselves. Was Lloyd just creating that mood, or had the unity of the inmates helped them unwind? Probably both.

“Mwa-ha-ha! We know that wouldn’t typically lead to much confusion, but today, please play along!”

Nexamic posed considerately. Lloyd pressed on regardless.

“And a group of prisoners who coincidentally had no ropes or shackles all broke into a run. They’ll be secured by some Azami army wagons that just happened to be in the vicinity!”

“Mwa-ha-ha! An awful lot of ‘just ☆ happened,’ but pay that no mind!”

“No need to point it out!” Amidine scoffed. The reply—an extra macho smile. Like it had been a compliment.

With that, guards and prisoners alike all assumed their starting positions.

Lloyd's voice echoed through the amp stone, signaling the start of the world's most farcical prison break.

"Okay, everyone! Time for work! We're working! We're working very hard!"

Once he had inhaled enough air, Lloyd loudly shouted the onomatopoeic words of an accident.

"Okay! Ka-boom crashhhhh clang! An accident occurred! An accident in progress as we speak! The scaffolding has collapsed and confusion reigns! Guards, act confused!"

"O-oh no! What do we do?!"

The guards put on a preschool play-worthy performance. Lloyd smiled as if he were a kindergarten teacher. And— "Okay, the accident has passed! Prisoners, follow your leaders and escape!"

Again, it was inarguably just an evacuation drill. It was odd the fire chief wasn't watching.

"Okay! Block B, line up!" Amidine roared, and his block's prisoners formed ranks. His reign of terror was still active.

"Okay, then, Block A, come with me!" Zalko shouted, his voice much more calm. Their different personalities were really showing here.

Merthophan and Nexamic spoke to them all.

"Even if there is a monster attack, we've got your rows flanked, so you'll be perfectly safe."

"Mwa-ha-ha! What's one or two monsters? My biceps will drive them off easily!"

They'd stripped down to a loincloth and bikini briefs, respectively.

"Where'd your clothes go?!" Amidine asked, unable to stop himself.

"We're short on time. Come to me after the escape to learn more."

"Mm! Save the *rebuttals* for a later occasion!"

Sensing peril, Amidine averted his eyes, focusing on getting the hell outta dodge.

“I’ll be taking up the rear! Everyone, just focus on escaping! Guards, thanks for all your help!”

Lloyd bowed politely, and the guards wordlessly doffed their caps.

“May we—not meet again!” Lloyd said. “But I valued the experience!”

With that, he ran after the fleeing prisoners.

Watching him go, one of the guards said, “You know, a moment ago, I was still unsure if it was okay to let them go.”

“Same.”

“Yup, yup.”

“But seeing that boy—I just can’t help but feel he’s got this. It’ll all be okay. Both the future of our prison and these dangerous criminals.”

The guards all nodded.

“Let’s hope this gets rid of Urgd, at least.”

“It will. He hasn’t shown himself. He probably already ran away.”

The guards were perhaps a tad optimistic. No one suspected that Urgd had altered his own body, and was preparing to attack.

“So far so good! Now we just need to wait for Azami to take out Urgd.”

Astax was watching the escape from the prison roof, relieved the plan had gone off without a hitch.

“If this drags Urgd’s misdeeds into the light of day...”

“Whose misdeeds?”

There was a noise like a bull breathing. A warm breath on his cheek. The veteran guard jumped, and turned around. He found— “W-Warden Urgd?!”

It took the form of a question because his figure was just that much more volumetric. His chest was so broad, his uniform buttons had popped right off. His sleeves and pants had grown so tight they’d ripped open, leaving him in shorts and a T-shirt—very casual for prison attire.

The moment he realized he was a transmogrified machine, Urgd had set

about strengthening himself in every way possible, making his body bulge and turn into the gross monster that stood here today.

The veteran guard gasped at those muscles, and Urgd grabbed his head like a bowling ball.

“Mmm? What’s going on? There’s been an accident? Oh, dear. We’re not supposed to be turning over prisoner corpses today!”

Even with his head secured, Astax had to argue that one.

“S-so you were— You can’t—unghhh!”

Urgd didn’t let him finish as he tightened his grip. The creak of Astax’s skull echoed through his body, and he howled in pain.

“Show respect! This is my castle, my garden, my kingdom! No—I’m putting criminals to good use! It’s the Urgd Recycling Center! And I’m the foreman!”

He seemed intoxicated with his newfound strength, and was being especially loquacious.

“But we’ve got defective products scattering like ants! That won’t do! Didn’t your mommy ever tell you to put your toys away?”

Urgd squinted down at the escaping inmates. His vice grip on Astax’s head relentlessly kneaded his skull.

“Toys...? Prisoners aren’t your *toys*! You’re the warden—your job is to rehabilitate!”

But Urgd merely sneered at his remarks.

“Criminals aren’t capable of reform or remorse. I should know; I used to be one.”

“What...?! That explains your lack of work history!”

The guard’s shocked expression made Urgd chuckle.

“It was worth mentioning, just for the look on your face. How does it feel to be bossed around by an ex-convict?”

“Wrong as hell.”

“We can’t reform, but we can be remade. Enhanced! If you’re lucky, you’ll keep your own mind, like I did—and gain a longer life and stronger body!”

“No, thanks!”

“Yeah? Then you don’t matter.”

Urgd lost interest in him, turning back to the prisoners.

“Guess I’d best perform my royal duty. Remind those escapees that this is a reign of terror.”

Imagining how he’d hurt each one until they started begging for mercy, Urgd delightedly leaped off the roof.

Meanwhile, Lloyd’s escape plan was going great. Everything was running smoothly, and Amidine’s smile was increasingly confident.

“We’ve made it this far... Mass jailbreak is easier than I thought!”

“Well, you’ve got me and the guards on your side. It’s like opening the door and strolling on out. Hardly worth my while.”

Zalko actually looked rather disappointed. He was the artistic type (of thief).

“Mwa-ha-ha!” Nexamic cried. “When your guard starts to slip, things start to go wrong! Stay alert!”

Lloyd chimed in, encouraging the prisoners.

“Everyone, Nexamic is right! Be careful, and let’s escape this unscrupulous entrepreneur!”

““““Yes, Lloyd, sir!””””

No one here was inclined to question that rhetoric. They’d follow him anywhere!

“There’s still some distance to the wagons!” Merthophan said. “Put your backs into this escape, like you would if you were working a field!”

Congrats on finally finding a way to connect jailbreaks to plowing.

“It might be far, but with the chestnut-haired devil on our side...we should be okay.”

But just as Zalko grew certain they'd succeed...

"My toys aren't going anywhere!"

A massive bulk from the sky landed like a meteor—Warden Urgd!

"U-Urgd?! What happened to you?!"

"He became a giant?! How?!"

Sheer shock had Amidine and Zalko in each other's embrace again. Urgd grinned at their evident fear.

"Aw, the actor and the thief are so close! You both want to know how I got like this?"

He let out a heavy breath like a bull. The prisoners all immediately assumed he'd gotten hooked on the hard stuff.

"Did you eat your veggies? Organic beans?"

"Clearly his protein intake was highly effective! His muscles responded in no time!"

Merthophan and Nexamic were not about to be shaken by these trifles, and that infuriated Urgd. Veins were popping on his forehead.

"You dare mock me? Like Lloyd? Are you also combat con artists?!"

"Did I hear my name?"

Lloyd stepped up; his eyes narrowed like he'd spotted a villain. Seeing their leader looking grim made the inmates quiver. Zalko's knees buckled.

Despite his previous loss, Urgd remained confident—his newfound power fueling his sails.

"Oh, ho! Trying to spook me, combat con artist?"

"What kind of name is *that*?"

Lloyd was not impressed by his new nickname.

"Is that your camouflage skill? Acting wimpy so people let their guards down, then using the shock of your true power to strike fear into their hearts? Brutality from such a cute face... But now I know the ruse, it won't work!"

With that, he hurled Astax at Lloyd.

“A-Astax?!”

After having had his head squeezed tightly, the veteran guard lay limp.

“Behold my new strength! Submit—or you’ll all end up like him!”

He was clearly drunk on power. Zalko gave him a look of pity.

“Oof, I can’t bear to watch this, Warden.”

“Look, thief, if you’re switching to my side, now’s the time.”

“Don’t be daft.” Zalko sighed, shrugging theatrically. “Switch sides? Do I look like an idiot who bets on a lame duck?”

“A what?!”

Remembering his own loss to Lloyd, Zalko said, “You think bigger makes you better? I sure did. You’re drunk on that power, but it’s cheap booze. And when you sober up—the hangover’s gonna be real bad.”

“You see this body and dare talk smack? I’m almost impressed.”

Before Urgd could finish his delusional statement, Zalko continued.

“C’mon, stop digging into my trauma. The wound will never heal once the chestnut-haired nice guy’s done raking you over the coals. Right, Lloyd?”

“The way he passed the buck...he’s become a total minion.”

Amidine shook his head at Zalko’s behavior, but...

“As someone who was raked over those same coals, I gotta agree.”

He grinned at Lloyd.

Lloyd’s eyes burned with fire and were locked on the villain.

“Mwa-ha-ha! No mercy for villains! An iron stake through those who mock the beauty of the flesh! Truly a man with hamstrings worth admiring!”

Lloyd handed Astax over to Merthophan.

“Merthophan, take care of him.”

“Okay... Lloyd.”

“Yes?”

“You’re strong enough. You’re nothing like the nervous boy who showed up for the academy test. Go out there and show him what’s what!”

Lloyd nodded, and walked toward Urgd.

Urgd stepped forward to meet Lloyd—like two fighters entering the ring. The size discrepancy was all too clear—Lloyd’s neck hurt from just looking up at his opponent.

But he showed no fear at all, and this convinced everyone (except Urgd) that he had this fight in the bag.

“Turning a prison into a personal plant for your villainy— You’re unfit to be a warden!”

“Ha! I never once thought I was. I’m no warden—I’m this prison’s king!”

“You rob prisoners of their chance at reform, yet call yourself king? There’s nothing worse than stripping people of their courage, and their chance to grow!”

“People don’t change. Criminals only go straight in fairy tales.”

“That line just proves you never even tried!”

Urgd’s body shook with laughter.

“Have it your way! You’re full of hot air, ain’tcha? Trying to make yourself sound stronger!”

“You have no right to decide who’s strong or who’s weak! Someone who’s never tried to change should be dealing with their own problems! I’m gonna straighten you out if I have to pound it into you!”

“I’ve made up my mind! First, I’m gonna break your legs! Then one finger at a time, no matter how much you weep!”

“It’s time! For you! To repent!”

With each shout, Lloyd swung his fist.

The immeasurable power of a Kunlun villager hitting him right on the smacker, in the chest, in his gut—a triple combo of critical points!

Urgd hadn't even tried to defend himself, and each blow landed home!

"Hngg? Hngggggggg?!"

His body was lifted off the ground and was flung skyward.

There was roar and a rush of wind, as if he'd been fired from a cannon. Without ever touching the ground again, Urgd smashed through the prison walls.

The ground cracked, and a burst of dirt shot out of Hell's Lock, so high it was visible for miles. No prisoner dared breathe a word.

But those who knew Lloyd took it in stride.

"Mwa-ha-ha! You're even more powerful than before!"

"Well done, Lloyd. Even the unripened grains bow their heads."

Words of praise—

But Lloyd wasn't done.

"Everyone, keep running! I'm gonna go reform him!"

With that, he flew off with a burst of *Aero*, chasing the warden.

Meanwhile, Urgd was buried in a heap of rubble, groaning and clutching his wounds, not sure what had even happened.

"Urghhhhhh?!"

Blood and stomach acid dripped from his mouth, along with some sort of oil—it smelled like nothing that should be coming out of a human body. And that just made him feel all the sicker.

"It's not over!"

Lloyd came flying in and stomped on him, hard. Lloyd's relentless footwork drove Urgd further into the ground.

"I'm not about to lose here! Not to a man who denies the possibility of change!"

"So what if I do? Hold your tongue, or I'll rip it out of your mouth!"

Despite his pain, Urgd was still fighting back. He threw bits of rubble like a

desperate child, and while Lloyd was busy defending against that, he reached out his arm.

“Gotcha!”

His hand closed round Lloyd, and Urgd pulled him close to his face.

“You’re a toy! Act like one! And get back in your box!”

With that, he slammed Lloyd as hard as he could against Block A.

A hole gaped in the wall like an artillery shell, but Urgd didn’t let Lloyd go.

“I got a work shift just for you! These walls were getting old! Your head’s gonna knock ’em down! Time for a full rebuild!”

Guards who saw Urgd’s rampage simply fled in terror.

“Running already? Wimps! Right, Lloyd Belladonna? Or are you dead? Did you die realizing what defying me means?!”

“How could I?!”

Lloyd broke free of Urgd’s grasp, grabbed his arm, and yanked him into a throw. This time it was Urgd’s body on the work shift—but then Lloyd froze.

“.....Bystanders!”

It seemed he was worried about hurting those who’d yet to flee.

And that momentary pause was all Urgd needed.

“Done already? Then it’s my turn!”

But before he could be flung again...

“Aero!”

Still clutching Urgd, Lloyd flew skyward, before anyone could be harmed.

“What kind of monster are you?! How can you fly *with* me?!”

Urgd’s astonishment was met with an icy glare.

“I’m afraid it won’t be your turn again. There’s no one else up here, so I don’t have to hold back!”

“Wha...?! You still weren’t at full strength?!”

Lloyd propelled himself higher with *Aero* bursts, and wind circled his body.

The air pressure dropped, and their surroundings grew chilly. An ominous sign that made Urgd start to sweat.

“Wreathed in a storm for maximum mobility— My ultimate move!”

Tempest Cloak—the move Lloyd used when he really meant business. The storm raging around him was sucking rubble and dust up with it, and all of that swirled in the vortex around him.

“You’re wearing?! A storm?! What the—?! How—”

Mid-air, Urgd was torn asunder by the high-speed swirling *Aero* winds—then slammed back down onto the ground by a mighty blow.

The impact provoked not a sound from the warden—he must have passed out in the air.

But the blow woke him again, and he coughed up blood.

“*Cough...cough...guh ha ha...*”

He looked up, chortling. Had he gone mad?

“No one up there? That’s it! Lloyd Belladonna! Your weakness!!!!”

A malevolent grin on his blood-spattered face. He slammed a fist into the ground, the recoil propelling him upright.

That seemed rather sprightly, but he was clearly pretty beat up; to the objective eye, he stood no chance against Lloyd’s strength.

“You’re still going? Fair enough! I’ll just keep fighting!”

Lloyd admired him for standing up even after getting hit with a Tempest Cloak. He was ready to see this fight through.

But Urgd was breathing heavily, laughing.

“Nah, the fight’s over.”

That took the wind out of Lloyd’s sails, and his shoulders slumped—but surrendering and bluffing are different, and something about the warden’s tone worried him.

“What are you plotting this time?” Lloyd asked.

“I’m not plotting anything!” Urgd said. “We haven’t fought long, but I’ve figured you out. You’re a softie who can’t make the tough decisions!”

With that, he turned and ran off—toward the medical ward.

“Oh no!”

Urgd reached his destination, grinning like he’d already won. His hand against the building’s walls...

There was an audible crack.

Lloyd’s face stiffened up.

“That’s what I wanna see, Lloyd Belladonna! At last, you respond like I want! Too late, sucker!”

Urgd put all his rage into his grip, and the crack widened.

“I crushed Block A already! This is *easy* for me now! And there’s tons of immobilized patients, civilian doctors—”

Urgd’s plan was to take the whole ward hostage.

“Argh...”

There was a look of agony on Lloyd’s face. He might have *Aero*, but any other attacks he tried—Urgd would be faster. And if he used a big move, that might blow the ward away. He was shrinking back.

The girls had noticed trouble, and were looking out the windows.

“Yo, seriously? He’s trying to crush the whole ward!”

“.....Should we help?”

“If Sir Lloyd’s struggling with him, one false move might bring this building down on everyone inside.”

“There’s a dozen-odd patients inside, and no time to evacuate—but no way to stop this giant warden, either.”

It wasn’t just a matter of escaping themselves. None of them could think of a good way out of this predicament.

“Do you get it yet? I can easily flatten this building! You can ignore the damage, and come after me—but how many people will die because of that?!”

“M-Marie...and the girls! They’re inside...!”

“Oh? Someone you know? Well, that just makes it worth my while!”

Each time Urgd spoke, the cracks on the wall grew bigger, and Lloyd shrank back.

Too many uncertainties— If he ignored that, he’d win, and the girls would likely make it out in time.

But that wasn’t his ideal plan. The hero of his favorite novel would never abandon anyone. Lloyd was here solely because he admired the soldier of that fictitious land—who would never allow small sacrifices for the greater good. He was the kind of cool guy who only ever sacrificed himself!

“You can’t cut anyone loose, no matter who they are! And as a sign of respect for what a good boy you are, I won’t hurt anyone—as long as you behave.”

“Behave?”

Urgd snapped his fingers. An army of mechanical weapons started marching out of the remains of the crematorium.

“Is that where—”

“It was underground! He pretended to burn the bodies and altered them instead!”

“.....That’s a lot.”

“How many of them has he got down there?!” Marie wailed.

There were at least fifty dolls on parade.

The sheer spectacle of it made Urgd’s belly shake.

“Wanna help me test this month’s batch?” he asked. “Oh, we’re good on testing their durability, so you can just stand there and let them hit you.”

In other words—don’t fight back, just stand there and die. Urgd’s sadistic streak was flaring up again.

But Lloyd's mind was made up already.

"If you'll spare the people in the med ward..."

At long, long last, things were going Urgd's way. He was positively drooling with anticipation.

"Sure, sure! I'll let any number of patients go! In return, don't you dare fight back!"

Urgd raised a hand, and the machines prepared to attack—but instead...

"Th-that's enough of that."

A timid, mild-mannered voice. Lloyd, Urgd, and the machines all turned to look.

"M-Minoxi?!"

There stood the former secretary.

The last person anyone suspected, and Urgd gave him a look of legitimate confusion.

"Mm? Hmm? Oh, an inmate from Block A? A timid man, too afraid to get involved in the escape? You didn't have much time left to serve, huh?"

Right on the money, and by way of answer, Minoxi took a step back. That seemed to amuse the warden, who piled on.

"If you don't want to die here, back off, feeble grandpa. That'd be the wiser choice. You ain't the type to stand up for what's right...and I'm the *warden*. Turn on me, and I'll ensure your sentence lasts the rest of your life!"

Fine time to be pulling rank, Urgd.

But Minoxi's response was not what he'd expected. The kind eyes behind those glasses narrowed, brushing off the threat.

"Wise...? N-not the word I'd choose."

"Oh?" Urgd growled.

Minoxi adjusted his spectacles.

"Left behind, I had time to think. Was I really right to look after my own

interests instead of helping the others? In time, I realized—if I avert my eyes from my own wrongdoing, I can never face the master or young Allan again.”

“Enjoy your extended stay, then! You’re gonna wither away here, never to see the world outside again! Never meeting anyone who might be waiting for you!”

But Minoxix fought back, his voice suddenly a roar.

“If I don’t take a stand here! Then I’m no different from when I fell to villainy, convincing myself it was justified! If I want to proudly claim I’ve changed— I don’t care how long it takes! Genuine atonement! Comes from changing *within!*”

A shout from Minoxix’s soul—that was met with brutal indifference.

“Right, suuuure, prisoners can *change*. They come in after how many murders and thefts, and sit within these walls for years, as if that’s gonna do anything. Just a change of scenery, still nothing but the same old deception and belligerence. Atonement, my ass. When our time comes, the hangman waits for us all.”

It sounded as if Urgd was talking about himself.

“Even the ones who acted like model prisoners were just bribing the guards to turn a blind eye to them and theirs, looking after their own necks. Ain’t no use in prisons. It’s far wiser to just admit the inmates are nothing but toys for me to play with.”

Clearly, those words came from experience: having seen the dirty moves the other convicts pulled, and the contempt in the guards’ eyes. But the self-centered conclusions infuriated both Minoxix and Lloyd.

“You’ve got issues,” Lloyd spat.

But Urgd wasn’t listening. He was talking to the void.

“Yes, these new bodies are salvation! Convicts incapable of atonement, recycled into the one thing that can change—their bodies! This is a paradise of alterations! I am the *savior*! No mere foreman, but a mechanical messiah!”

His monologue ended in a shout, but Lloyd was having none of it.

“That isn’t remotely true. There are people here trying to change. People who

are outgoing or dedicated, but who made a simple mistake that led to a conviction—”

“Nope! One criminal is the same as another. Shitbirds will always be shitbirds. Even if you die trying to save them, not a single one of those fleeing scum will even be grateful.”

Urgd seemed sure of it.

But Minox argued back before Lloyd could.

“There’s one right here! I’m a criminal, and I’m deeply grateful for what Lloyd’s done.”

Urgd was soundly defeated, but he responded like a child throwing a tantrum after knowing they had lost.

“Hahhh?! Spare me that bullshit! You’re old, you don’t count!”

“Then what about a handsome devil?”

“Whaaaat?!”

A dapper purr of a voice. Urgd swung toward it—and found Amidine. Had he not escaped already?

“Amidine Oxo?! Why are you here?!”

And behind Amidine—was Zalko.

“Never thought I’d hear a guard grumble because a prisoner was in their prison!”

“That thief, too?! *Hngg?!*”

It wasn’t just these two. Every escaped prisoner had come back. The guards were with them as well.

“E-everyone?”

“We’re back !” Nexamic cooed, flashing his hamstrings.

Beside him, Merthophan offered an explanation. “The other prisoners insisted they could hardly run away and leave you in danger. There was no convincing them otherwise.”

He seemed rather pleased about it.

“I’d rather have run,” Amidine grumbled.

Zalko patted his shoulders, grinning.

“But once everyone else said they’d go back, you couldn’t refuse.”

“Don’t read too much into it. I just figured if he owes us, I can get a few more years off my sentence.”

Amidine was half crafty, half hot-and-cold.

“So we just gotta beat up these ugly things, Lloyd?”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re prisoner or guard! We’re getting through this together!”

Everyone lined up, presenting a unified front. That made Urgd waver, but then he chuckled.

“It doesn’t matter how many powerless fools join forces! Have you forgotten?” Urgd howled. “I’ve got the patients and medical staff held hostage! I swing my arm, and this whole building goes down, killing everyone in it!”

“I don’t think so,” Minox said, perfectly calm.

“You don’t? Well, thinking’s free! And useless without grounds!”

Minox scratched his head, unperturbed.

“Grounds? How about—it’s already over?”

“Over? Over my dead body! Behold! I just have to squeeze, and this building—huh?”

At this juncture, Urgd noticed something amiss.

The brick walls of the building were covered in tree roots. These were only growing in size, turning the medical ward into a thousand-year-old tree.

“I was taken over by a Treant at one point. Ever since, if given sufficient time, I can do things like this. Though this appearance isn’t great for everyday use.”



“Huh? T-treants?!”

The roots ran from Minox’s feet through the ground to the medical ward’s walls.

“While you were giving a monologue, I used my roots to shore up the building. It will no longer budge before your lackluster power.”

Inside and out, the building was reinforced like concrete. Urgd had been vainly trying to shatter the walls the whole time Minox spoke, and they hadn’t budged an inch.

With the med ward secure, Amidine started barking orders.

“Okay, inmates! Get the patients out of there! Assume each evacuee comes with a reduced sentence!”

“““Aye-aye, sir!”””

His minions led the charge, and Amidine followed on their heels.

With that, the rest of the prisoners charged at the fifty mechanical weapons. “For Lloyd!” “For the prison!” Brandishing tools and billy clubs, they attacked.

“Inmates and guards! Do not take risks! Tiger...Pretty ☆ Hip Press! In! Prison!”

“Once weakened, hit ’em with numbers! Farming Tornado! Agricultural... Typhoon! Prison Special!”

Nobody was exactly clear what was different about the prison version of these moves, but Nexamic and Merthophan were certainly devastating the machine weapons’ numbers.

This allowed the rest to target individual units, joining forces to take them down one at a time.

Urgd stood watching. To his mind, comrades were for betraying before they betrayed you, and he found this sight hard to accept.

“You said prisoners can’t change— Has this changed *your* mind?” Lloyd asked.

“Shut up!” Urgd roared, still balking. “I’m the king! I’m the savior! I’m the foreman! My castle is my paradise, and your invasion is a sin! Execute!

Annihilate! Get scrapped!”

“I’ve heard enough of this ‘king’ nonsense!” Lloyd snapped. “You’re nothing but an unscrupulous entrepreneur!”

“A what?” Urgd asked. “Where’d that phrase come from?”

Thwack!

But before he even finished, Lloyd’s fist planted in his face.

Thwack!

Without another word, a second hit. Only then did Lloyd sigh.

“The cooling-off period is a basic consumer right.”

“Doesn’t usually involve fists, though! Urgk!”

Thwack!

“This is the punishment for unwarranted profits gained through false claims of a self-improvement seminar!”

“Claims of a what?! When did I—gah!”

Thwack!

“Next, for passing a prison off as a training camp—Gaston’s fury!”

“Who the hell is Gaston?! *Blegh!*”

Thwack!

“Entrepreneurs who take hospital patients hostage! Need to cool off! And repent!”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about! You’re not making seeeeeeeense!”

Thwack, thwack, thwack.....

Each punch made Urgd’s body shrink. He wound up falling to the ground like a spent balloon.

“Uh-oh, I feel your pain. Lloyd’s fists sure do hurt!” Zalko said. He’d been on the receiving end himself, and was rather sympathetic.

The dust had settled at Hell's Lock. The fortress-like walls had been reduced to rubble, as if subjected to a ballistics bombardment. Perhaps there was still some dust in the air.

Urgd now held the record for the villain Lloyd had punched the most, and he was half-buried in the rubble, not moving.

"What even is...an unscrupulous entrepreneur...?"

He might not be moving, but he was still talking. With a patient on his shoulders, Amidine gawked at the warden's stamina.

"Talk about monsters... Him and the kid who trounced him."

To Amidine's eye, Lloyd wasn't much better.

Lloyd had done too much punching and broken his hands, but was busy straightening the bones out.

"A-are you okay there, Lloyd?"

"I'm fine! Minox, that was very nice work! One of the older students at the academy can do the same thing— Are you going to join the army, too?"

"Ha-ha-ha... If I were forty or fifty years younger, that might have been an option."

They shared a smile. War makes fast friends of us all.

"Quite a hard workout for someone my age! I'll be all stiff tomorrow."

With that, Minox wrapped things up, and Merthophan walked over to them; he was done overseeing the patient evacuation.

"Fine work again, Lloyd."

"Mwa-ha-ha! That warden sure made a chill run through my buttocks!"

"Oh, hey! Is everyone okay?"

"Mm! Every patient is accounted for. We'll have to reward everyone. The escape itself is no longer relevant, but the outcome works in our favor!"

"Maria—Marie is looking after those who got injured."

"Oh...well, good. I'll go help with that!"

Lloyd dashed off, leaving Amidine wearily scratching his head.

“My chance to flee, but...I’m just not up for it now.”

He chuckled, and Minox raised a brow.

“It’s not too late!” the secretary said. “To run—or to rethink your way of life.”

Maybe a trace of spite, but Amidine didn’t have it in him to get mad.

“Fair enough, old-timer. I was certainly planning on using this mess to skedaddle, but...the idea of Sardin’s kid gunning for my life puts the kibosh on that.”

He knew why fear of Lloyd had left Zalko reluctant to escape.

Minox held out his hand for a handshake.

“Good,” he said. “If you were to run away now, you’d never had a chance to pay for your crimes.”

“You’ve sure changed. You used to be so timid.”

“Even at my age, people can change. You’re still young— You’ve got at least three opportunities to change, right?”

“So I can screw up two more times?” Amidine chuckled. He turned to Merthophan. “There you have it. Escort me off to this next prison.”

“Very well,” Merthophan said. “Still, I’m astonished not one person fled in the chaos.”

Amidine raised a brow at that. “Really? No one?”

“All present and accounted for. Every single man was ready and willing to serve time at the next jail.”

Even the most dangerous criminals here had stayed put. Likely the result of Lloyd’s kindness—and his strength.

“That boy would make a better mafia boss than he would a soldier,” Amidine said.

“Yes, I thought the same thing,” Minox agreed.

Side note: Minox finished his sentence safely and returned to Threonine.

While serving as his secretary, he used his experiences in prison to help rehabilitate ex-cons.

Meanwhile, the girls were searching for the manual among the crematorium's remains.

Riho was gingerly looking through the rubble. "Geez, how'd our undercover mission turn into hard labor?"

".....Stop griping..... Even Selen's working," Phyllo said.

"Come, Vritra!" Selen said. "This rubble is in our way!"

"Working" clearly meant delegating work to her cursed belt.

"Well, at least Vritra is," Riho said. Selen was never not domineering.

".....The artifact advantage. I want to see Master again, but...I can wait."

"Not sure I can! Ugh, let's just get this over with so we can kick back."

Not long after, they found the door to the underground lab.

"Oh! There is a hidden door! I found it first!"

".....I did all the work, though," Vritra murmured, robbed of his accomplishment.

"Thanks, Vritra."

".....Three cheers for the belt."

Fortunately, the other two got it—and that left him ready to cry.

"*Sniff*... If I had eyes, they would be filled with tears."

Meanwhile, his mistress was trying to pry the door open, but it proved too heavy for her.

"Hmph! Well, that is rather unwieldy. It's closing under its own weight! Vritra, assist me here."

Selen grabbed her belt, and tied Vritra in a knot around the handle. Then she tied the other end to a tree to prevent the door from closing on them.

"M-Mistress Selen?! This is uncalled for!"

Using a priceless artifact like a spare bit of rope— So much for the Divine Beast.

“Then let’s grab this here manual.”

“Right away!”

“Er, hey! You’re just leaving me here?!”

“.....You’re the belt for the job.”

Phyllo made that sound like a compliment, but could you really consider it as one? Vritra was left on his own.

“Oh dear... No one would have treated me like this back in the day. Is this really where I belong? I must find my daughter and return to my real body.”

The forlorn Divine Beast was actually a forty-something single dad.

He was talking to himself—yet someone *answered*.

“True, the demon director, the reptilian visage with the glare of a snake Ishikura—you’re more than just a handy rope.”

“——?! Who’s there?!”

A tone far too bright and cheery— A rabbit costume struck a jolly pose that looked entirely out of place amidst the rubble.

“.....Eve.....President Eva?!”

“That’s Lady Eve to you, belt bastard! I’m kidding, of course.”

Vritra had tensed up immediately, but Eve paid that no attention, and acted like she always did. Her expression was hidden underneath the costume, but she was likely smiling blithely.

His former employer’s bottomless depths left him on edge.

“You must be so sure of yourself, showing up here—when we’ve just crushed one of your nefarious schemes.”

“You really got me good! But finding you alone might just be a real windfall. Whoops!”

Eve suddenly staggered.

“This is a bad one... Won’t be a moment! Here goes!”

With that, she slid off the rubble heap, and began banging her head against the rocks.

Unnatural behavior, an unnatural spectacle. The rabbit costume moved like a thing possessed, and Vritra shuddered at the sight.

When the fit died down, the rabbit’s head was a wreck. Its eyes were caved in, and its ears were torn off—a total horror show.

“Whew, finally over. I knew it was coming, so whatever! Lemme get to the point.”

One hand holding her broken head in place, she turned to Vritra.

“I’m here to scout ya, Ishikura. With Eugy gone, I’m short on lab staff.”

Vritra was indignant.

“You think I’ll listen? That day—you took my daughter away! What did you do to her?”

“I *know* you’ll listen. I’d hardly show myself here, otherwise. You’ve got no choice.”

With that, Eve popped the head off her costume. A surprise face reveal—but the girl inside was normal.

She probably wasn’t even fifteen, and had straight black hair. She had an air of fragility to her facial features. Like a sheltered heiress with a sickly disposition.

But Vritra let out a wordless shriek, as if a hideous monster had emerged.

“——!——!——?! ”

He was so shocked, it wouldn’t have been a surprise if his eyes rolled back into his head—and a malevolent smile that hardly suited her features appeared on the girl’s face.

“Man, you sure nailed that reaction! Makes it all worth it!”

“Wh-why?! President Eva, why are you Asako?! My daughter?!”

“That’s the thing! I *am* your daughter now! But inside—I’m still the same old eighty-nine-year-old grandma.”

Vritra had no words, and Eve kept talking.

“Read the rest online—is what I’d like to say, but unfortunately we are in an *isekai*.”

Eve flopped down onto the ground, twisting the girl’s delicate features.

“So the thing is... I was actually murdered. By *your* daughter.”

“Mur—what do you mean?! You’re the one who kidnapped *her*!”

Eve showed no signs of remorse. Her attitude didn’t match her face at all.

“True. I, President Eva, took her away—but don’t you remember, I was wasting away. I didn’t have much time left to live. Asako also suffered from the same illness.”

That silenced Vritra.

“You were researching those crazy runes, hoping it would lead to a cure, Ishikura. Calling in every favor you’d earned as a top scientist.”

“Yes, I was clutching at straws, and those led me to the runes. You were there for the same reasons. Motivated to place your faith in something with even less plausibility than your average folk remedy.”

“I had mere months to live, so I lit a fire under Eugy and pushed the plan forward. That device, overflowing with what we’d dubbed ‘mana.’ I only recently learned it was actually a portal to another world.”

Vritra quietly listened to his daughter’s voice recite his old employer’s words.

“Upping the flow of mana from the device to make the biological restoration rune function—odds of success were fifty-fifty. So I got your daughter’s help, and had her be my guinea pig.”

“You turned my daughter into your guinea pig?!”

“Don’t scowl at me! Not that you’ve got a mouth to scowl with.”

She laughed at her own joke.

“I managed to talk her into it, and took her to the experiment room. She was excited to get the same treatment if the restoration was a success. But your kid had good instincts. She sensed something amiss, and tried to run.”

Eve showed no trace of guilt— It was like she was sharing a tale of her heroics.

“I yelled, ‘Freeze!’ and drew the gun I carried to protect myself. I figured if the rune worked, it’d restore her wounds and her condition— I was prepared to shoot her legs, at least. But she fought! Attacked an eighty-nine-year-old woman! Can you believe it?”

Her own actions were infinitely worse, but she clearly didn’t care.

“And in the struggle, President Eva’s chest—my chest—got shot. It hurt like the dickens! I was basically dead. My heart stopped, and I was waiting for my brain to die with it. Following so far? But then!”

She clapped her hands together, like a barker working the crowd.

“The device went nuts! You got mixed up in the fallout yourself, so you know the drill. Reality and fantasy, all swirling together, turning everyone around into these demon lords.”

“.....Yeah.”

“I was dead, but my brain was just barely alive—and Asako was reeling from the shock of having killed someone, and had shut herself away inside a shell in her mind. Luckily enough, we were a match—and we wound up sharing this body.”

“‘Luckily,’ my metal buckle! You’ve *stolen* my daughter’s body!”

“Oh, believe me, I don’t intend to stay like this. I’ve got a plan to make a new body and escape this one— It’s an application of the cyberweapons, and frankly the whole reason I’ve had this place working on them.”

Eve gestured at the prison around them.

“With Eugy gone, my scheme’s at a standstill...but look!”

She pulled a fruit from her pocket—it resembled a mangosteen.

“A Mastema Fruit? Those seal away the demon lords!”

“Apply this same logic to a body, and I can trap a soul within it. The opposite of how weak mind-control demon lords work—Abaddon or the like.”



Eve started juggling the Mastema Fruit. A sinister smile on that sad child's face.

"My body's still in the works, but we got *yours* prepared. Eugy genuinely believed you'd be on her side, see. It was so like her! She was always worried about your daughter."

Vritra did not respond. Eve shot him a smile. Cute, innocent—and unscrupulous. She was conscious of the fact that she was a teenage girl talking to her father.

"If this plan works out, I'll be out of your daughter's body. Her life was all you ever wanted— How can you refuse? Join me, Jin Ishikura."

A few minutes later— The girls filed out of the underground lab. Their arms clutching a pile of documents—the dust on them scattering with each step.

They coughed a few times, relishing the outside air.

"Ugh, how deplorable! That warden did *not* clean properly. I found a rag he'd used to wipe up spilled soup but then abandoned on the spot!"

".....Ashes everywhere. You'd think you'd be too scared of fires to smoke down there."

"And a crazy amount of dust. Even I clean before it gets that bad!"

The uncleanness might have defeated them, but they'd won the battle. They weren't exactly beaming, but there was a hint of pride—and they had a mountain of evidence.

"I can't parse the details, but this is definitely a manual on how to turn corpses into cyborgs."

"We can leave the rest to Rinko. And now we can easily scrub Lloyd's record clean!"

".....Such a relief."

"Agreed!"

As Phyllo sighed, Selen and Riho remembered Vritra.

"Yo, you should probably untie your belt. It'll be a shame to leave him like

that.”

“Oh, good point. Vritra, I’ll just undo this knot.”

But the belt was no longer its usual talkative self.

“My, has the cat got your tongue, Vritra?”

“Probably sulking,” Riho chuckled. “This was pretty mean.”

Selen puffed out her chest, huffing.

“What are you talking about, Riho? If this was enough to make him sulk, he’d never do anything else!”

“.....And you’re proud of that?”

Few people would be.

Just how hard a life did he lead? Riho and Phyllo had nothing but sympathy. They looked at the silent belt and decided it must be tired, and they should let him be.

Selen undid the knot, and put the belt around her waist. As she did, Lloyd and Marie came running over.

“Is everyone okay?”

“Sorry we’re late! Did you find anything?”

Selen was the first to respond to their voices—or at least, Lloyd’s.

“Sir Lloyd! Look at the fruits of my labor! We have uncovered Urgd’s malfeasance! *Cough cough!*”

She’d moved a tad too aggressively and received a cloud of dust to the face. Her own mobility working against her.

While she struggled to recover from the accident, Riho gave a real report.

“Here you go, Marie. This is the manual we’re looking for, right? It’s pretty tricky stuff; I can’t wrap my head around it.”

Marie grabbed a document and started quietly reading through it.

“Mm, this is definitely what Mom was talking about. Were there any dubious devices?”

“.....Those...we left lying in the crematorium basement,” Phyllo said.

Marie nodded gravely.

“Two irrefutable pieces of evidence. This should help us prove Profen is involved in all this.”

Lloyd jumped.

“Profen’s involved?! A kingdom that big?! Unforgivable!”

“Lloyd...”

“How many victims does this fake self-improvement seminar have?! If a proper nation is behind it, it’s no wonder Gaston was fooled!”

As always, his fury was largely misdirected, and the girls just gaped at him, then realized it was simply a misunderstanding. It’s scary how you could get used to things.

Marie shook it off, looking down at the manual.

“Mom said the king of Profen has history with Alka, and is trying to unleash the demon lords to shake the world to its foundations. No one in Azami can just stand idly by.”

“.....Is this our chance?” Phyllo asked.

Marie winked at her. “Yup, we can barge into Profen. Gotta get them bad guys!”

“Vritra seemed to have history with her, too. We’re in! Right, Vritra?”

But the cursed belt didn’t reply.

“He’s really sulking! Best let him be for now,” Riho suggested.

“Don’t be absurd!” Selen said. “Vritra would never be so easily defeated! I’ll chant a hundred verses about all of Lloyd’s good points as if I am reciting my prayers tonight!”

“.....Let him sleep.”

But Selen had not yet realized that Vritra was no longer possessing her belt—he had fallen into the hands of their enemy.

It was like the true last boss had made a threat that caused the betrayal of a party member. And they were about to invade the enemy's castle—right after all their stats leaked.

This smells like the endgame is approaching— “The HQ of the unscrupulous entrepreneurs! We'll have to show them who means business!”

But as long as this oblivious kid is around, the story won't unfold how *anyone* plans. Ally or enemy alike.

Afterword

Reiwa, Year 3. An insignificant light novelist named Satou was facing his greatest threat yet.

Three novels in a row, timed with the anime airing. It's enough to cause stress and eat through the lining of any man's stomach.

The damage to the gastric mucosa only worsened over time. Things got so bad, drinking hot liquids made my back tingle. It was time to make a beeline to the doctor's office.

Oh, how I suffered. It was my second time! While the first proved no big deal, this time the threat was real. So many bloated stomachs and internal photos. The noise of the shutters clicking made me feel like a pinup model turned inside out—but I was in no state to joke about it. Shit hurt.

And the upshot? H. Pylori. I was also told I'm overweight.

I was on antibiotics for a week to see if it would help, and it totally did! Gosh! I could eat snacks right before bed without heartburn! I could overeat without indigestion! Meals, snacks, and café lattes all tasted good again! I thanked my doctors preemptively before they could tell me off.

To my editor, Maizou. Sorry for all the trouble again, thanks for sticking with me. And sorry I'm such a disaster. Eh-heh-heh. (Wringing hands.) To my illustrator, Nao Watanuki, thank you for always providing such lovely art. Your Warden Urgd was exactly how I imagined him to be, so I had to make Lloyd's final battle with him even more intense.

To Fusemachi, on the manga adaption. Minox's reappearance here is entirely because of the scene you drew in volume six, where he left a note saying he'd polished up the axes. I thought, "Oh, deep down, the secretary's actually a good guy!" and that proved the incentive for the prison arc. I would not have thought of this plot without you! Thanks again.

To Souchu, on the spin-off manga, it is all thanks to your skills that the characters who never appeared in the novels and the minor characters in the spotlight all seem so alive. I'm touched every time I see one of them graduate from being an extra to part of the supporting cast (especially the Temple Knights.) Thank you so much.

A hearty round of applause to everyone involved with the anime. My mother was delighted with it. She said, "So many people worked on it, you'd better thank them!" My deepest respect and gratitude.

And to my doctor, I'm thinking about going back on a diet! Once summer is over.

Also, I am beyond grateful to the readers who have followed me this far. I promise to work myself to the bone to bring things to a solid conclusion... I've not broken a bone yet, but if that's what it takes...I'm there for you!

Though perhaps my stomach is at greater risk.

TOSHIO SATOU

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